

**Community media.
Video, local TV, film, and photography
as tools for community communication.**

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INTRODUCTION



In his essay *Constituents of a Theory of the Media* (1970)¹ Hans-Magnus Enzensberger provided a fundamental critique of the New Left's purist attitude towards the mass media. He showed convincingly that the hypersensitive reaction of the young generation to the mass media was based on fear and a sense of helplessness in the face of their overwhelming presence. He also attacked élitist tendencies in left-wing politics:

«In Western Europe the socialist movement mainly addresses itself to a public of converts through newspapers and journals which are exclusive in terms of language, content, and form. Presumably the people who produce them listen to the Rolling Stones, watch occupations and strikes on television, and go to the cinema to see a Western or a Godard; only in their capacity as producers do they make an exception, and in their analyses, the whole media sector is reduced to the slogan of *manipulation*. Every foray into this territory is regarded from the start with suspicion as a step towards integration. This suspicion is not unjustified; it can however also mask one's own ambivalence and insecurity. Fear of being swallowed up by the system is a sign of weakness; it presupposes that capitalism could overcome any contradiction.»

He then pleaded for the development of a left-wing strategy towards the media. He argued that the media should be used as mobilising tools rather than remain exclusively in the hands of the ruling few:

«The open secret of the electronic media, the decisive political factor, which has been waiting, suppressed or crippled, for its moment to come, is their mobilising power. For the first time in history, the media are making possible mass participation in a social and socialised productive process, the practical means of which are in the hands of the masses themselves. Such a use of them would bring the communications media, which up to now have not deserved the name, into their own. In its present form, equipment like television or film does not serve communication but prevents it.»

What the essay did not explain was how such a strategy of placing the means of communication in the hands of the people could be developed. Since the protest movement of the 1960s, we can look back over a busy period of alternative media experimentation. During this period new challenging ideas emerged and practical examples of using media as a liberating force occurred in north America and west Europe.

In the United Kingdom hundreds of collectively produced news sheets and community papers were launched. Photographers learnt to team up with action groups to supply pictures for leaflets and pamphlets, for exhibitions

and tape-slide shows dealing with political issues. Film groups documented social struggles and fed their productions into national, if limited, distribution networks. Video — one of the most exciting new communication media — was employed for its wide range of applications and in particular for its instant replay capacity. A more genuinely democratic form of locally originated television gradually emerged, and more recently local radio has moved to the forefront of the media debate because of its flexibility and low operational costs. Poster collectives, mural workshops, graphic designers, and alternative book publishers surfaced, all deploying their communication skills to involve people in educational and political processes.

The two fundamental concepts informing this practice are *access* and *participation*. There is a conviction that the means of communication and expression should be placed in the hands of those people who clearly need to exercise greater control over their immediate environment, particularly in housing, schools, traffic schemes, play and recreational facilities. Community issues are mostly decided by a few officials with little or no consultation. This has led to apathy and deprivation among the people on the receiving end. The introduction of community media has supplied new channels for the expression of discontent and criticism. Once this happens, a process of internal dialogue in the community can take place, providing opportunities for developing alternative strategies. From the amplification of a doorstep complaint to a fundamental critique of the status quo is a journey that can be set in motion by the introduction of simple forms of community media.

Alternative media workers see themselves as enablers of communication processes rather than as producers of ready-made messages. They think that people's opinions, thoughts, and feelings should find direct expression and not be restricted or remoulded by leaders. In practise, however, the ideal of total access is frequently difficult to achieve. Most practitioners believe that people should at least have editorial control where they cannot be directly involved in all decisions concerning the planning, making, and use of media productions.

It is not surprising that the development of the alternative media movement was crucially stimulated by the community action struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Generally, grassroots activists were inspired by the same belief in the necessity of people's involvement in all public and private decisions concerning their homes and their wider social and physical environment. The concepts of *participation* and *intervention* have been

further nourished by collective and non-authoritarian methods of decision-making which were rediscovered in the youth rebellion of the sixties. But there was also an objective strategic demand for the development of participatory approaches in community struggles. Unlike the factory and the office where interventionist activity mostly relies on established and well-oiled union machinery, community activists were, and still are, faced with an organisational vacuum. The lack of existing organisations hindered community struggle. Therefore the push for effective mobilisation techniques became a primary task of the experiments that were taking place, and alternative forms of community communication slowly emerged.

However, community communication has not been limited to the practice of community action alone. In a period of economic crisis and widespread political apathy, media have also been increasingly used to encourage educational processes in the community; to stimulate group awareness, and to build up cultural identity among minority groups. Community arts centres in particular have recently fulfilled a vital role in providing the necessary facilities for media workshops involving community groups and community activists. Well-structured workshops catering for the educational and cultural needs of a group over a long period of time have often contributed more to consciousness-raising than one-off political interventions.

Who are the individuals and groups pioneering community communication? They come from all sorts of backgrounds. They are photographers and film-makers unhappy with their professional roles, or are artists disenchanted with privatised modes of artistic production, but feeling that art could be a weapon for social change. There are community workers looking towards community media as instruments for improving group processes and information exchange between groups. Researchers have started to look at media practice as a new method for action-research. There are also schoolteachers turning to community communication because of its vast educational potential. Most of the practitioners tend to be generalists rather than specialists, viewing media work as an activity embracing a number of social skills, artistic methods, and different areas of practical knowledge. Many deeply mistrust high specialisation and see it as a divisive instrument of a society anxious to contain creative political energies within a safe framework of well-defined categories and disciplines. Because of the problems of obtaining finance, community media workers have been forced to attach a range of professional labels to their work: *art, community work, social work, education, and communication.*

So far, a loose body of concepts, methods, and techniques have evolved on how to apply print, visual and audio-visual media in a variety of contexts. The community communication movement has generated awareness and insight into the potential of media for community development. But it has not succeeded yet in getting to grips with the many political implications involved. Alternative media practice is still in its formative stage. Most of the groups have to struggle for their financial survival and are often preoccupied with the testing of effective working methods. Up till now only a few organisations have supported community communication experiments. Among the most active and pioneering funding bodies are the Community Arts Panel of the Arts Council of Great Britain, the Gulbenkian Foundation, some of the Regional Arts Associations, and a few local authorities and education authorities.

Unfortunately there has been very little contact between the different groups spread over the country. Community media workers often do not know what is happening elsewhere and little mutual support has developed. In 1977, however, a nationwide co-ordinating body came together. Called the *Community Communications Group (COMCOM)*, it aimed to act as an information exchange for the development of community communication services, including press, video, film, radio, television, and other communication resources. It advocated adequate funding for these services and stood for the statutory right of access to, and participation in, the national and regional information services. Most recently its regional structure has weakened and criticism has been levelled at its narrowing range of activities, particularly its concentration on local radio matters.

The development of community media activities poses a set of difficult problems. How can the movement speed up its growth and later consolidate without losing its critical impetus, without being compromised by restrictive requirements of private and public funding agencies? And how will it be possible to provide training and support for individuals entering the new field without creating a further profession with all its awkward institutional limitations? Finally, how can community media workers build stronger links with the community action movement and existing working-class organisations? These problems need thorough discussion involving all groups and individuals interested in establishing a progressive community media movement. But what is primarily needed is the sharing of experience accumulated so far. All too often discussions take place on an abstract level without considering what is actually happening on the ground, and what

practitioners have to say about their work, the problems they face, and the philosophical assumptions upon which their experiments are based.

Therefore, research on the many aspects of community communication should be encouraged urgently in order to provide a sound overview of the daily practice of community media workers. This book is intended as a contribution to the development of that research by presenting documentary material on the work of six groups operating with video, local TV, film, and photography. It is hoped that similar accounts about the activities of other media groups will be compiled, especially in the areas of print, radio, and the role of community arts centres as facilitators of communication processes.

Basically our research has relied on pamphlets, articles, and grant-applications found in the archives of the groups. This written material was supplemented by a number of interviews with members of the groups, which were then edited for the text. We have tried to present the practitioners' point of view as clearly as possible without imposing an external critique. Where evaluation and assessment of project work was undertaken, it was done in dialogue form, with groups supplying the critical comments themselves. The chapter on the West London Media Workshop is an in-depth case study of that group's development over a period of three years. It should give the reader a more realistic picture of the difficulties and excitement of a media experiment than was possible with the other, shorter group portraits.

The book has been written as a joint venture between Graham Wade and Heinz Nigg. Graham Wade was responsible for the chapters on Channel 40, The Basement, and the Background section. Heinz Nigg did the chapters on the West London Media Workshop, Liberation Films, Blackfriars, WELD, the Introduction, and the Summary. He has also co-ordinated the research project for which he gained a PhD from Zürich University.

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BACKGROUND

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This chapter aims to supply some of the background behind the development of community media in the UK. It does not pretend to be anything like the whole story and merely offers some of the strands which have led up to certain community media practices in the 1970s. It is intended to stimulate interest in areas which perhaps many community media workers have never considered to be antecedents of their current activities.

UK Documentary Film

The documentary film movement sprang up in Britain during the 1930s. The name of John Grierson has come to symbolise what that development stood for, and there can be little doubt that his influence has found wide-ranging expression in many fields over a long period of time. Grierson provides a link between the beginnings of realist film in the 1930s and the establishment of the National Film Board of Canada in the early 1940s.

It is not by chance that the National Film Board of Canada's experimental programme in the late 1960s, *Challenge for Change*, which has had a distinct influence on community media developments on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1970s, should have been born within an organisation that Grierson had originally set up.

John Grierson was born in Perthshire, Scotland, in 1898 and died in 1972. As a sociologist he travelled to America in 1924 to investigate the relationship between mass media and public opinion particularly in relation to politics. This he did for three years on a Rockefeller scholarship and during this time he developed a strong interest in film. He first used the term *documentary* to describe a film by Robert Flaherty in a 1926 review he wrote for a US newspaper.

He was strongly influenced by the ideas of Walter Lippman who said that effective democracy was impossible because ordinary people could not be kept fully informed of all that was happening around them. It was Grierson's formulation of the documentary which attempted to overcome this lack of awareness. His beliefs are powerfully echoed in many of the attitudes of alternative media workers who hope to overcome social disadvantage by introducing cameras and recorders into communities. But Grierson was not just interested in providing information. As he wrote: «The way of information will not serve; it is too discursive... The new language of apprehension which must communicate the corporate nature of community life must in fact be something more in the nature of a dramatic language than a rational one.»

When he returned to the UK he took a job at the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit and in 1929 made his first film *Drifters*, about herring fishermen. In 1935 he became head of the General Post Office Film Unit where he produced a great number of films and gathered around him the various talents who made up the original documentary film group - such as Basil Wright, Arthur Elton, Edgar Anstey, and Humphrey Jennings. Between 1933 and 1937 such films as *Industrial Britain* (Director: Flaherty), *Coal Face* (Calvacanti) and *Night Mail* (Harry Watt and Basil Wright) were produced by Grierson - first at the EMB and then at the GPO.

The war years saw him working for the government in Canada on film policy, which resulted in the setting up of the National Film Board. After the war Grierson worked for UNESCO and the UK Central Office of Information from which he resigned in 1954. His last years were spent making a series of TV programmes for the commercial channel Scottish Television, called *This Wonderful World*. In his later years he seemed to slip out of the mainstream activity which his famous work of the 1930s had indicated he would continue.

Grierson's major contribution was his ability, financial and organisational, to create a framework within which documentary films in considerable numbers could be made. He managed to persuade government - and Tory governments at that in 1930s Britain - to make money available for young film-makers experimenting with a new style. His influence on the development of commercially sponsored and government produced films in Britain has been profound. Unfortunately the potential for social criticism which the 1930s films displayed was largely swamped by developments in the post-war period — and indeed in Grierson's work itself.

The post-war Labour government incorporated film into the new Central Office of Information as a tool to make governing more easy. The commercial sector — countless Shell films serve as good an example as any other — were used to promote good public relations. The cutting edge was very much lost. The collective form of working created before the war also largely dissolved. The people who put up the money took a much closer interest in what it was going to be used for; the freedoms of early experiment evaporated.

But the legacy of the movement was not entirely lost. The new school of British film-makers loosely brought together under the Free Cinema umbrella took the natural realism and contemporary themes of the documentary into their own work. The late 1950s and early 1960s saw such notable films

as *We are the Lambeth Boys* (director: Karel Reisz), *A Taste of Honey* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (both Tony Richardson). This last film and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz) were both based on novels by Alan Sillitoe, a leading writer of «the novel as a document» school of the late 1950s¹. Although most of their work was fictional, its treatment was based on realism.

Another echo of the documentary can be detected in the 1960s in television. In fact the word documentary is now commonly used to refer to this particular form of investigative television journalism. *World in Action* - a title originally used in Canada - has become one of the longest running TV series of documentaries produced by Granada, one of the commercial channel's regional companies.

Through the 1960s right up to the present, drama on television has also been marked by the documentary influence particularly in the plays of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett, the director and producer. Their work includes *Cathy Come Home*, *The Big Flame* and *Days of Hope*. The recent production by Garnett of *Law and Order*, the story of how the police frame a suspect for armed robbery and his subsequent experiences through the courts and prisons, was heavily criticised because it was «too realistic». Prison warders objected in these very terms and their union banned the BBC from filming in prisons.

In some ways the work of modern independent film groups like Cinema Action, The Berwick Street Film Collective, and Liberation Films has more in common with the kinds of films Grierson produced in the 1930s. *Night Cleaners* (Berwick Street) and *Upper Clyde Shipbuilders* (Cinema Action) are not dissimilar in content from many of the subjects dealt with forty years before. Although it must be said that the political beliefs of the radical left are far more in evidence in these modern films.

Stuart Hood, in an essay in *Journey to a Legend and Back*, stresses that the realist school can only be understood by placing it in its social and political context : «Its members were young middle class men and women who, in the aftermath of the General Strike - in which many of their contemporaries had been student scabs - were confronted with the evidence of social deprivation, of poverty and hardship among the working class: conditions that were intensified by the onset of the world economic crisis. Their political views were, in general, not clearly defined and even more rarely theoretically based ... The preponderance of Fabian reformism, the sheltered background in which most of them grew up, and the deep social gulf separating

them from the working class explains why, as Grierson somewhat curiously put it, they had lost that proud contact with simple labour which characterises the younger countries and particularly America.»

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Bert Hogenkamp. *Film and the Workers' Movement in Britain 1929–39*. In: *Sight & Sound*, Spring, 1976.

US Documentary Photography

While Grierson was at work in Britain, another group of men and women in the US were carrying out pioneering activities in the field of documentary photography. In parallel with the British documentary movement, a good deal of what was happening in the US was being financed through government agencies. In particular the photographic programme undertaken by the historical section of the Farm Security Administration headed by Roy Stryker did much to advance realism in photography.

Their work during the 1930s coincided with the years of the Great Depression and the styles they adopted to portray the miseries of rural poverty were true to their subjects. The task of the agency was to convey to the US public how bad conditions really were. Stryker managed to gather around himself – again in a not dissimilar way from Grierson – a group of highly talented photographers whose work has had a sharp impact right up to the present day. Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, Dorothea Lange, Jack Delano and Ben Shan are just a handful of the names associated with the FSA project.

Unfortunately the kind of work practised by the FSA was quite quickly coopted by the large circulation picture papers. Right up to this day the colour supplement can present a harshly realistic picture of a starving black baby on one page to be faced on the next page by a sumptuous advertisement (often sexist) for a bottle of whisky. This decontextualised use of photographs, where reality is lost because everything appears meaningless,

has been one of the central reasons for community photography to grow up as an alternative to the use of the documentary photograph in the mass media.

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William Stott. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. Oxford University Press, 1973.

F.J. Hurley. *Portrait of a Decade*. Da Capo Press. New York, 1977.

Challenge for Change

The Challenge for Change programme - sponsored by the National Film Board of Canada - took form in 1966. Its French name was Société Nouvelle, literally «new society». The project described itself as: «a programme designed to improve communications, create greater understanding, promote new ideas and provoke social change.» This catch-all rag-bag of aims - quite typical of government financed schemes - could mean virtually anything to anyone. To understand a little more about it, it is necessary to examine its roots.

Through the 1950s and 1960s the NFB's output had grown more glossy, but less socially relevant. Sydney Newman, NFB chairman from 1970 to 1975, said: «Our productions have lost the sharp edge of involvement and commitment to people's needs.» During the mid-1960s the Canadian government became interested in the *War on Poverty* community development projects in the US and wanted to use film as a vehicle to bring the realities of Canada's poverty home to the population as a whole. Specifically this resulted in a documentary film *The Things I Cannot Change*, being made by a young director, Tanya Ballantine.

The film took an intimate view of the daily life of a poor Montreal family which had ten children. It was intended as a sympathetic account of what it was really like to be poor, but a television screening proved that at least part of the audience reacted in a very different way to that intended. The family's neighbours singled them out for abuse, and eventually they found it necessary to withdraw their children from the local school because of constant taunts. An important lesson had been learned: when making this type of film it is necessary to involve the subjects and their wider community in all

stages of production. That way everyone understands what's going on and feels part of the end product because they have helped shape it.

This insight marked a significant change in the traditional film-maker's attitude based on the idea of the individual artist in total control of her or his work. An element of democracy was introduced into the process of film production. *The Fogo Island experiment*, which began in 1967, was the first concrete example of this new style in practice.

Fogo Island was a depressed fishing community of some 5,000 inhabitants spread over several villages. Unemployment was high and around 60% of the population were on welfare benefits. When the film crew arrived they announced that everything would be done in consultation with the locals. The films that resulted, like *Fishermen's Meeting* and *Billy Crane Moves Away*, gave a relatively unmediated insight into the Fogo Islanders' lives. The films brought the population closer together and promoted a better understanding of the problems they faced. Gradually people began to confront these difficulties rather than apathetically accept them as they had largely done before.

The Fogo experiment was seen as a successful example of film being used as a catalyst for more effective community development. It was not a solution in itself, but laid open a possible path to a solution. Nevertheless film presented certain drawbacks for this kind of work. It required a professional crew, was expensive and took a good deal of time. It was during the later 1960s that cheaper, low-gauge video recording units were becoming available in north America, and it was to this new technology - developed by the US as part of its Vietnam war effort - that Challenge for Change next turned.

The original video project took place in Montreal, organised around the Saint Jacques Citizens' Committee, which was made up of relatively poor people. There is an excellent NFB film *VTR-St. Jacques*, which documents what went on there. Again the project was successful in stimulating new activity to improve local conditions. Over the years Challenge for Change has developed many projects using video and film in similar ways. It would be foolish to pretend that they have all been successful — some of the cable-linked experiments have been considered failures — but this new approach has been influential on other projects both in America and Europe — and indeed elsewhere.

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J. Hopkins et al. Video in Community Development. Ovum Ltd. London 1972.

Radical Software

The magazine *Radical Software*, which began publication in New York in 1970, became a prominent focal point for those exploring low-gauge video. Although virtually all of the magazine's coverage was devoted to the US and Canada, its influence, nevertheless, made itself felt in Europe and Australia.

It began life being published by Michael Shamberg as part of the activities of the Raindance Corporation. The caption which accompanied the graphic on the cover of the first issue read: «The Alternative Television Movement.» The editorial section on the contents' page ran:

«As problem solvers we are a nation of hardware freaks. Some are into seizing property or destroying it. Others believe in protecting property at any cost - including life - or at least guarding against spontaneous use. Meanwhile, unseen systems shape our lives.

«Power is no longer measured in land, labor or capital, but by access to information and the means to disseminate it. As long as the most powerful tools (not weapons) are in the hands of those who would hoard them, no alternative cultural vision can succeed. Unless we design and implement alternate information structures which transcend and reconfigure the existing ones, other alternate systems and life-styles will be no more than products of the existing process.»

Although many of the articles in *Radical Software* had exotic titles - like *Zen Tubes* and *Taping the Galaxy* - the bulk of the contents consisted of serious reporting of what was happening in the video world. By issue four, the publication had expanded to eighty large format pages carrying as much information as a lengthy textbook - in fact that issue was really three magazines rolled into one as it included a section produced in Canada and another produced in California.

Its style clearly developed from the hippy and anarchist revolt which swept North America in the wake of the anti-war movement. Over the issues of *Radical Software* most of the basic concerns of community video are dealt with in one way or another - they maintain their relevance right up to the present day and are well worth the trouble of looking out in libraries.

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Radical Software: all issues. New York 1970 onwards.

Michael Shamberg. Guerilla Television. Raindance Corporation. New York, 1971.

The spread of UK community video

The first ripples of video activity in the UK can be traced back to around 1969. It was in that year that a group called TVX was formed «to operate in with thru electronic media.» That was how it was announced in the alternative newspaper *International Times* (number 55). John Hopkins did most to foster an interest in low-gauge video at that time - and he still operates in the field at London's *Fantasy Factory* video centre. The first video event in this country was centred on the 1969 Camden Arts Festival where a variety of European tapes went on show.

TVX and the London Arts Lab carried on working with video in different contexts, from video art to early community video. In an article in *International Times* number 58, June 1969, Bradley Martin wrote: «Tonight's topic is video... In fact there's a whole scene waiting for the taking and only some of it lies behind the frozen faces of Frost, Braden and President Wilson.» Some of the excited myths of video were already being born.

Low-gauge video remained very much the preserve of the alternative society. By 1973 a few more people had discovered it and by that time there were at least four separate groups with portapacks in the relatively small squatting community around Prince of Wales Crescent in north London. Some of the first specifically community oriented video tapes were made about housing and squatters; extracts from one of these were bought by the BBC news magazine programme *Nationwide*, making it one of the earliest half-inch video tapes to be broadcast.

Organisations like Inter-Action, which now operates more like a big business than a community arts project, were into the field early as well. Inter-Action had a multi-media bus specially built with a £10,000 grant from private industry and this incorporated video, although they laid stress on the need for a multi-media approach to community arts work. A film called *The Big Red Van* gives a good view of how it was supposed to be used.

Low-gauge video was beginning to spread to education, particularly into colleges. A few of the Community Development Projects - the UK's rough equivalent to the US War-on-Poverty programme - also began to adopt video as a tool. *Video in Community Development*, published by the Centre for Advanced Television Studies in 1972, was commissioned by the Home Office in this connection. The fact that it mostly consists of extracts from north American projects, and especially those of the Challenge for Change programme, underlines the American influence on alternative media practice in the UK. It was also during this period that the local cable TV stations began operating in this country — they are dealt with more thoroughly elsewhere in this chapter.

The first organisation to emerge with the aim of giving a voice to this quite widespread, but often isolated activity, was the Association of London Independent Video Groups in 1974. Later known as the Association of Video Workers (AVW), it came together primarily in an effort to put pressure on funding bodies. Finance had always been a fundamental problem for those using video - as indeed it still is - and clearly some kind of collective voice could have had a beneficial effect on the way the money was doled out.

In fact the group never succeeded in placing concerted pressure on the funding bodies, although various campaigns were launched to obtain more funding from the British Film Institute and the Greater London Arts Association. AVW did, however, provide an initial forum for video users to discuss their work. Although it was very much London based, there were several contacts made with regional projects and this was reflected in the group's occasional newsletter *Video Work*, which reached a national circulation of about 400 an issue. AVW was wound up formally at the end of 1977 largely because its meetings were drawing fewer and fewer people. This did not reflect a lack of video activity, but rather a disenchantment with the organisation which had never commanded a deep commitment from a range of video workers. Soon after its demise a number of its former members started meeting informally as the London Community Video Workers Collective, whose activities are directed to just community video.

This new group has compiled a *Directory of Video Tapes* in conjunction with the London Council of Social Service, which lists video tapes available for exchange and hire. Another development has been the formation of a national group called *COMCOM*, which stands for the *Community Communications Group*. This got off the ground in mid-1977 and aims to «bring together activists and sympathisers intent on ensuring the development of decentralised, democratically controlled and non-profit making communication systems in the UK.»

It rather ambitiously set out to cover several media from libraries and print through to local radio and video. So far it has managed to set up a few regional groups, but for a national organisation, albeit a young one, its coverage is patchy. Its main area of interest is local radio.

Specifically, the video scene in the UK is still a fragmented one. There is no effective national organisation and consequently there is no coherent funding policy or future development strategy. Video workers still lead an essentially hand-to-mouth existence with vastly inadequate resources. There are probably between 50—100 projects using video in the UK today. More precise figures are unavailable because the research has never been done. The numbers for photography and film are similarly imprecise, but certainly fewer than for video. The Arts Council of Great Britain recently issued a list of all the community arts projects known in early 1978, and this totalled 178 names. However, there was no breakdown by media available and many of the projects did not involve video, photography or film.

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UK local cable television

The local cable television experiments, which took place in the UK through the 1970s, occupy an ambivalent position in the development of mainstream community media - and in particular video. The simplest way of explaining this uncertainty is to look at their financial and controlling inte-

rests. Rather than coming from small voluntary groups supported by state or private charitable funds, the impetus for the experiments grew out of the activities of large multi-million pound companies like EMI and Rediffusion. It is from this standpoint that the history of local cable stations in the UK is best understood.

It all started in 1972, when the Tory Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, Christopher Chataway, granted a licence for the origination of programmes on a local television network owned by Greenwich Cablevision in south-east London. Over the following two years another four projects were granted permission to start up in Bristol, Sheffield, Swindon and Wellingborough. The only other ongoing experiment to have happened is the one at the new city of Milton Keynes, *Channel 40*, which receives detailed treatment in a later chapter.

With one exception the original batch of five stations was owned by commercial companies which had longstanding interests in cable networks. The odd one out was *Swindon Viewpoint*, a station owned by EMI which claimed to have no cable interests. That station used a cable network owned by Radio Rentals. The state of play at the moment of writing is that Bristol, Sheffield and Wellingborough have all terminated their experiments, Greenwich is in a state of animated suspension, Swindon has transferred to community ownership and is still working full-time - as is Channel 40.

But why did these projects come about in the first place? The short answer is they were born out of a search for profits. The UK cable industry supplies the television signals to over ten per cent of UK homes, which represents a massive investment in equipment. This service was largely developed through the '50s, the decade which saw television leap from a mere 350,000 sets in 1950 to 10,470,000 sets in UK homes in 1960. Cable grew up because in those early days there were many problems of reception. Some areas were shielded from the VHF frequency transmitters by hills or tall buildings resulting in poor rooftop aerial reception. The only solution was to import good quality signals from an ideally sited mast which would relay them to individual homes through cables.

Because the cable companies provided a virtual monopoly service their businesses did relatively well. However, through the 1960s and 1970s the development of UHF frequency transmissions for the new colour services rather upset the applecart. UHF coverage was much better than VHF and ever since its introduction small UHF repeater stations have been constructed all over the country improving ordinary aerial reception even more. This effectively broke the companies' monopoly. Why pay out yearly for

the rental of cable signals when you could erect your own aerial, which in the long or even medium term would work out much cheaper?

So large numbers of people stopped renting their cable connection. The companies had to find new angles to the cable product in order to reverse this trend. Importing out-of-area channels has been one tactic. So, for example, a London cable network could make available the signals of ATV (Midlands) and Granada (north-west) as well as those locally available. But as most programmes are networked on ITV the advantages are minimal.

What the companies were really after was *Pay-TV*. This was reckoned to be the only profitable way of promoting cable. The companies would buy up some attractive feature film or big sporting event and then sell that to its audience. Brief experiments in the mid-1960s were discontinued after a new Labour government had refused permission for their expansion. There was a strong current of opinion in the early 1970s that such a scheme - authorised by a Tory government - could bring a quick profit bonanza.

Instead of a sympathetic Tory government, 1974 saw the return of the Labour Party to power. Suddenly, the big companies seemed to lose interest. Rediffusion pulled out of Bristol Channel, British Relay terminated Sheffield Cablevision, Greenwich sacked its production staff and EMI handed Swindon Viewpoint to a local committee. The smallest of the five stations, Wellingborough - originally owned by local businessmen, but later substantially taken over by a Canadian cable company - lasted the shortest time of all, exactly one year.

Subsequent developments have seen two very short-term cable projects carried out in Scotland on an essentially non-commercial basis and the setting up of the Milton Keynes station financed from public sources.

Access

It is true to say that three of the stations - Greenwich, Wellingborough and Sheffield - began operating with little genuine desire to follow closely the principles of *community access television*. However, in the cases of Bristol and Swindon, there was a much greater awareness of what *access* was about. These attitudes were very much dictated by who was put in day-to-day charge of running the individual stations. And this is also where a sense of ambivalence creeps in, because often the stations were staffed by young people with ideas of creating a new participatory medium being employed by companies interested in maximising profits. Sandwiched in between these two extremes were the station managers, who were the chosen represen-

tatives of the companies yet had to deal with «idealistic» workers.

Many conflicts arose between these different sets of interests and, unfortunately, many of these have passed unrecorded. Most of them were to do with the workers, either individually or collectively, wishing to democratise the television service more and the managements resisting these developments. Station managers swayed with the wind a little, but usually came down on the side of their paymasters - who gave them salaries often twice that, or even more, of the highest paid producer.

The stations' staffs varied in size from five to sixteen, their annual budgets from £20,000 to £70,000 and their capital investment in equipment a similar amount. On average, they produced six hours of original material per week spread over about three first-run transmissions plus additional repeats. Equipment usually included a three-camera studio recording onto one-inch video tape recorders, and three or more half-inch portapacks for community use and location recording. Technical problems in getting half-inch recorded tapes up to sufficient standard for cable transmission were frequent. The availability of time base correctors and newer ranges of portable video equipment has gone a long way to solving these difficulties.

The sizes of potential audiences ranged from around 10,000 to 100,000. Actual viewing figures with any degree of accuracy, however, are very hard to come by. The survey which comes nearest to any kind of credibility was the one conducted by Croll and Husband of Leicester University at Swindon Viewpoint, which showed that roughly 25% of those on the cable watched the local service at least once a week. Regular viewing of any one programme fell to a maximum of 14% of the responding sample. These figures are generally regarded as being on the high side and apply to one of the more successful stations. Estimates for Bristol put viewing audiences at about the five per cent mark and this would seem to be nearer the average for all five stations.

But audience figures are not necessarily the best yardstick to judge the performance of the stations. BBC-2, for instance, consistently attracts only a small proportion of its potential audience. What is even more difficult to measure is the number of people who have become directly involved in programme-making in some way and how much it has been of real benefit to them. Subjective impressions would seem to indicate that this aspect of the cable experiments was quite productive. And in the final analysis most of the stations were hardly given a reasonable chance to establish themselves. All have been under a considerable amount of pressure at various times which has diverted energy from the basic job of running a

local station.

The cable stations provided a focus of attention on low-gauge video activity in the UK. They received more publicity than any other area. The ordinary workers at the stations have tended to hold similar views to those working with video in schools, community arts organisations and on the street. Because the cable stations have had much more money spent on them than any other sphere of low-gauge video activity - approximately £1,000,000 between 1972-1978 - then technically they have tended to be at the forefront and therefore of interest.

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The spread of UK community photography

Young photographers have rejected in increasing numbers the exploitative uses of photography and have instead looked for situations where it might be pursued more meaningfully. Surprisingly, the first move in the direction of community photography started with a concern to provide workshop facilities for children.

Jo Spence, a disillusioned professional photographer, believes that the main impetus behind «kids photography» stemmed from a need to do something with children that would not automatically alienate them. Photography was an ideal medium because it had not become part of the traditional school

curriculum and was not dependent on language skills. It had an immediate appeal for children - and particularly those who had rejected the exam-oriented world of conventional schooling.

Another influence during this period was the use of photography to support rights campaigns. And again the concern for children figured prominently within these pressure groups. Jo Spence became involved with the *Children's Rights Workshop*, a group firmly based on the ideas of libertarian education. It was while working there that she called one of the first meetings to bring people together who were working in this relatively new field. About 19 people turned up including people from various youth projects, Islington Bus Company, Blackfriars, and Inter-Action.

The movement expanded on the simple principle that it is not enough to portray reality for other people, it is the people who must portray it themselves. It was also concerned with how photographers could contribute their skills to community action groups and document political struggles. One of the biggest steps forward came when the Half Moon Gallery in East London joined forces with the Photography Workshop - a group including Jo Spence and Terry Dennett - to form the Half Moon Photography Workshop in 1975. Early 1976 saw the first fruits of this amalgamation with the publication of the magazine *Camerawork*. Over 16 editions, this periodical has managed to discuss many of the issues surrounding alternative and community photography and its success can be measured by its regular sales of over 5,000 copies per issue.

The Half Moon Photography Workshop has also been responsible for organising a variety of seminars on similar themes. In 1977 they ran a particularly valuable series of three one-day sessions - at the Blackfriars Settlement in South London - on «Kids and Photography...In and Out of School.» The wide-ranging discussions and displays which took place have since resulted in photography being adopted by a number of people who attended but were new at the time to the field.

There are relatively few groups in the UK that have specialised in the practise of alternative photography, but the few that have - like Blackfriars and the Half Moon - have managed to make solid advances. Many community arts projects now have at least one part of their operation working with photography. The fact that the four case studies - Centerprise, Telford Community Arts, the Liverpool Rathbone Project and the Tower Hamlets Arts Project - which appear in the Arts Council's report on community arts, all include some activity on photography is clear evidence that it is becoming

more widespread. Many of its adherents would argue that its cheapness in relation to video and film should encourage this trend.

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The idea of community arts

Another strand in the background of community media is the way they have become part of what is widely referred to as *the community arts*. Community arts was the label adopted by the Arts Council as a convenient way of categorising a whole range of activities that requested money from them during the 1970s.

These activities - including video, photography and film, as well as street theatre, print shops and mural painting - did not fall into the traditional arts slots and so a suitable pigeon-hole had to be found. In 1973, the Arts Council decided to set up a working party to look at how this new area could be made to fit into their overall work. The formation of this *Community Arts Working Party*, which was its official title, marked the administrative birth of the concept and the beginning of a debate in the arts world which is still far from settled.

The nature of this debate can be summed up in the cliché question: but is it art? The report of the Community Arts Working Party, which appeared in 1974, said they could find no simple answer to it. However, the report suggested that community arts did deserve Arts Council support. As a result the Arts Council set up a Community Arts Committee for a two-year experimental period in April 1975. In the first year of the Committee's work an allocation of £176,000 was made to 57 projects. During the second year £350,000 went to 75 projects.

In May, 1976, a Community Arts Evaluation Working Group was established and later this issued a report on the experience of the two-year funding experiment. They came to the conclusion that «what we have seen has convinced us that the experiment has been well justified. It has revealed to our satisfaction a new path to the fulfilment of the Council's second chartered

duty to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public.» (Community arts report, 1977)

However, there are other passages which hit more of a warning note: «At the same time there is clearly no justification for funding any activity which is not arts based.» There is even a section which warns against projects which might artificially include an arts element to gain funding from the Arts Council. All through official discussions on community arts there runs this paradox. The concern is to prove there is an artistic connection. No wonder countless groups have sat around endlessly trying to think of phrases that will impress the Arts Council for their grant applications.

Specifically the relationship between video and community arts has had its ups and downs. Although several video projects have been funded there are references to video merely being used as a toy rather than a bona fide arts activity - whatever that amounts to. Film and photography do not appear to come in for direct criticism, probably because they tend to occupy less prominent positions in the community arts field. A heavy attack on the video scene was launched when a secret report entitled *The Resistible Rise of Video Culture*, commissioned by the Arts Council, was leaked. The status of this document remained unclear, but its message could be reasonably summed up: don't fund video. It displayed little knowledge of what was happening on the ground.

Although there is no space here to give a detailed account of the arts debate and Arts Council funding policies — there is one aspect which deserves at least a mention. And that is the virtual absence of any reference to politics. The fact that a good part of community arts activity — as defined by the Arts Council and including video, film and photography — is politically oriented makes this exclusion a little odd. Anyone with the vaguest knowledge of community theatre groups, poster printshops, or video groups, realises that often their activities and the individuals involved are intensely political.

That is not to say they are necessarily party political in the narrow sense that groups affiliate to the Labour Party or the Socialist Workers Party, but that their motivation stems from a desire to change society. And that desire is political and none the worse for it. Campaigning for tenants on council estates using video or drama is political. Making available photographs taken at a demonstration by a community group to those arrested for assault on the police is political. Printing and designing posters for the Grunwick strikers is political. It would be far better if the political context was openly admitted.

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West London Media Workshop

**(formerly Video Group of the Community Action
Centre in Notting Hill)**

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Video

«Television is here. It has become an accepted part of society's day to day life. Community/Alternative video is using a medium which is a common reference point of nearly everybody. The TV set tells the story of what is happening in the society in which we live. On it we watch society's struggles and contradictions being played out or covered up. As such it plays a central role in the individual's awareness and conception of his/her role in society.»

«It is just because of this, because TV is part of people's consciousness in a way that film, photography etc. are not, that makes it for us such a vital medium to work with. Any use of alternative TV does not simply impinge on the periphery of people's consciousness but hits them at a point which is both central and immediate.»

«We are also saying that the viewing experience of television is radically different to a cinematic experience. The size of the television image is such that it presents people and situations usually at less than life size. This means that the person viewing is much more in charge of what he/she is seeing, the television invites reaction rather than forces reaction. Because the audio-visual stimulation is low-key, he/she is less likely to be overwhelmed, the experience is containable and therefore more open to be shared, discussed, used collectively. Other factors affect this - the size of the screen limits the number of people who are able to satisfactorily watch it, and allows people to sit round it (as in the home) in a more random way; it is usually watched without the lights off. Everything works to make it part of what is going on, rather than the absolute dictator. People can see each other, exchange eye contact, talk while the programme is going on; it is an experience that is collective and mutual and can create the conditions for follow-up discussions, and inter-action.»

(video report of the Community Action Centre, Notting Hill, 1976)

Introduction

The early literature on community video spread an atmosphere of great enthusiasm. It seemed as though with video a wonder drug had come on the market of audiovisual communication, promising a bright future for media animation in the community. Video is relatively cheap compared with the costs of 16mm film production. It offers an instant replay facility and a wide range of socio-political applications. These advantages encouraged a number of groups in the UK to embark on setting up community based video resources.

The video group of the Community Action Centre in Notting Hill (now called West London Media Workshop) was one of the experiments initiated by a group of local activists to test out the potential of community video and to eventually separate its myth from reality. As community workers they were rather sceptical about the many promises made in regards to the new field. They saw their task as exploring the concept of community video over a number of years in one particular community rather than undertaking short-term experiments like Challenge for Change did in Canada, or Inter-Action and Liberation Films in Great Britain.

This chapter gives an in-depth account of the project work carried out by the CAC video group from 1975 to 1979. The video group members do not believe that their development provides an ideal model of how to operate an open resource. But they hope that some aspects of their experience might become a starting point for others and that the reader may learn from their mistakes. So rather than presenting a glamorous success story, this chapter tries to communicate success and failure side by side. It shows the early optimism of a group of individuals determined to work on the fringes of the system in order to maintain maximum freedom of experimentation. But it also captures their anxieties and frustrations, as they struggle to survive on a minimum of resources and income.

How the CAC video group came together

The Community Action Centre (CAC)

In the late 1960s, North Kensington, a run down working class area in London, saw a rapid development of community action experiments. Struggles for more control over housing, better play facilities, and against the destruction of the environment through a motorway, were initiated by a young generation of political activists, disillusioned by the inertia of traditional left parties, who were looking for more spontaneous forms of how people can join together for action. Jan O'Malley described that movement in an exciting book on grassroots organising, «The politics of community action», 1977.

North Kensington has a relatively mobile population with only a weakly developed working class tradition. The majority of its 30,000 inhabitants are employed in the service and catering industries, are badly organised, and work outside of the area they live in. A handicap in community organising on a broad front is the lack of communication between the various immi-

grant communities which have settled down in North Kensington over the last twenty-five years. A mixture of ideological differences and mutual distrust make it difficult to bring all the community groups together to fight for common concerns.

In the early 1970s it became increasingly apparent to local community activists that besides the fight against conservative housing policy, the setting up of a community centre would be an important step in bringing the numerous community groups and ethnic minorities together and strengthen the political and social cohesion of the neighbourhood.

In January 1974, over thirty local groups formed themselves into the Community Action Centre, an organisation which was to push for the speedy conversion of a disused church - the Talbot Tabernacle - into the needed community centre.¹

The video group

Six people who had either practical experience or were interested in using video as an organising/communication tool in the neighbourhood formed themselves into a video group. They came from different backgrounds - community work, teaching, theatre, youth work. Because some of the group were members of the CAC as well, it seemed logical to develop a community video resource under the umbrella of that promising new organisation.

The video group thus became part of the Community Action Centre and started to operate from a small room at 45 Kensington Park Road (the temporary base of the CAC), along with two other media resources in the area—the local community printing press which had started in 1968, and the local community darkroom. The members of the CAC video group had lived and worked in the area for a number of years. They saw themselves locating video equipment and skills in the community on a permanent basis and allowing the resource to grow and develop out of continuous contact with that community. What experiences had led the members of the group to want to establish a video resource in Notting Hill?

Andy Porter, born 1945: «My first active involvement with video was at Goldsmith College when I was a student on the community and youth work course (1972–1974). I had gone there out of a sense of frustration which had followed three years of intensive involvement on both a paid and voluntary basis with community action in Notting Hill. I had come to the area in 1968, a few months after leaving Sussex University and a period of labour-

ring and through a friend became involved on one of the first community newspapers, *The Hustler*. Then I got drawn into action around play and housing and in 1969–1970 worked as a playleader and later as a detached youthworker. I worked with a group of 14–16 year olds for two years — helping them to produce their own newspaper, *Crunch*.

Then I worked for a year in the local community printing press before going to Goldsmith College as a community work student.

«One of the reasons I went to Goldsmith was to learn and use video on the course. I had already come across its use by Inter-Action on the playground, and, although I wasn't too impressed by this, there was the feeling that here was something important that could be developed. I think at the time I felt this in a very general way — as a reaction to the power of the mass media, and in line with the political ideology behind my involvement in community action; the need for people to take more control of the forces governing their lives, and therefore the control of their own information about themselves. Another dimension to this was that if I was to work in the community again, I wanted to have defined skills to offer. And of course, it would be dishonest not to admit that I was attracted by some kind of «glamour» attached to TV.

«During the course I used video a number of times. One of the most powerful experiences was the use of this new medium in a citizens' rights course. There we talked a lot about getting the clients' perspective into citizens' rights education; of how the clients perceive the advice giving situation. A woman on our course was a member of a group of unsupported mothers, and one evening we went to her flat to meet all the members of the group. We set a studio camera up and started to record the discussion. The idea was to get their response to social workers. It was an amazing experience. First they were hesitant, but suddenly they just took off. They handed the microphone around to each other, and they just let it come out about how they felt they were treated by some of the social workers. You could see the emotional support between them. We used some of the tape on the citizens' rights course and we also used it at a conference for social work training officers. Our video-tape input about these unmarried mothers really upset the balance. It galvanised a lot of personal feeling because it made the officers look at themselves. They came to the conference very confident about their role and suddenly they were confronted with the clients' perspective. Some of them were quite shocked about how paternalistic social workers can often behave.

«Besides my practical involvement with doing video I was also influenced by reading *Video in community development*, a report written by John Hopkins, Cliff Evans, Steve Herman, and John Kirk. It was about the early North American experiments. I was also reading the magazine *Radical Software*, which was the voice of alternative television in the States.»

Another member of the group, Ken Lynam, who at that time was involved in the pensioners' movement, bumped into video accidentally.

Ken Lynam, born 1949: «I first used video at a West London Pensioners' Unity Day. We were able to borrow some equipment after a quick lesson of how to use it. Six of us had a go that day. We've still got the tape — it's terrible. A classic what not to do with video, no co-ordination between us, just people playing with the camera. We shot all the wrong shots from all the wrong angles. But we did a couple of nice interviews, and I thought that video could be a very useful organising tool. Then I also felt the power of the media — actually being able to film something like that, to have access to video equipment that was relatively easy to use and producing visual material that you could play-back quickly to people. That sort of power interested me.»

How did you become interested in community work?

Ken: «I was quite alienated from traditional left politics, particularly the exclusively industrially oriented politics of Trotskyist organisations. I felt that nothing was being done within the non-industrial sectors of the working class. A lot needed to be done on the community front, and I felt that this was political and not just social work.»

From 1973 — 1976 Ken worked with Task Force in Kensington and Chelsea where he helped set up pensioners' action groups. This gave him his first experience of organising and campaigning at a community level. The campaigns and projects were aimed at both organising pensioners to fight for a decent pension, while at the same time attacking some of society's stereotypes about pensioners. He felt that video had great potential for communicating between pensioners' groups and from pensioners' groups to the 'outside world'.

Alfonso Santana, born 1954, is the only member of the video group who comes from Notting Hill. He is the son of Spanish immigrants.

Fonce: «My move into video was strongly tied to my relationship with Andy. I had come to know him relatively well through his youth work with us,

a group of so-called skinheads. There was the magazine *Crunch*, a film we tried to make, the many evenings we socialised as a group, the club he helped us to get, the work on the playground, and his attempts to get us involved in local struggles and groups.

«Because of these I had great faith in Andy as a person and in his beliefs, even though I didn't necessarily understand them. Aside from the relationship he was offering me the opportunity to become involved in something I felt was the realm of experts and the higher educated — something I suppose I never dreamt I would get into.

«Anyhow, when it came down to it, the choice was this — I could stay at my job, with which I was bored (and my friends were leaving). The job was making medical electronic instruments and it was well paid. Or I could leave and go and work with Andy, where I was not sure what would happen, but felt it would be incredibly exciting for me, where I could maybe contribute towards helping Andy realise what at that time was only a dream, and in the process benefit enormously. The result was that I took more and more days off work to help Andy, until within a couple of months I was working with the video on a very full-time basis — in many cases seven days a week.

«One of my first impressions was that no one was very confident about using the equipment and that I was not so far behind as I thought I would be. This boosted my confidence about my ability to contribute positively and encouraged me to further involve myself, ensuring that I picked up as many skills as possible in the shortest space of time. My role was very much equipment orientated. I felt I could make a positive contribution in this way, and it was a role I could easily grasp.»

Andy, Ken, and Fonce eventually formed the nucleus of the video resource. The other initiators of the group were Siobhan Lennon, a member of the West London Theatre Workshop; David Head, a lecturer at the North Kensington Evening Institute; and Angie Price, an ILEA home tutor. They were all involved in setting up the project at some stage or other and were instrumental in putting the first grant application together. But in the end it was up to the nucleus to carry the responsibility of running the video resource.

Getting under way: the first six months

It was agreed that the overall purpose of a first half-year pilot scheme would be to demonstrate the usefulness of the medium to the different groups under the CAC umbrella and to as many individuals and groups as possible, who in one way or other were involved in local activities. The concept behind this approach was to develop the video resource in response to the community and its needs.

Andy Porter: «I remember the first leaflets saying *CAC gets video* with a picture of the area with headings saying: information equals power, make tapes, take them down to the town hall, show them at your social club. And at the bottom it said: Our own Television? It was almost trying to make television a living cultural form for the area. When you think we had one portapack and an inadequate edit deck that was pretty ambitious. But basically the principle behind it was that the open resource should grow as the community grew, in response to it, and shouldn't be something that's brought in, imposed, and then removed.»

So right from the start the video group had no intention at all to function as a specialised communications team producing polished consumer products, but was convinced of the necessity of access. They wanted to make the video skills available to as many individuals and groups as possible, so that a users group would develop around the equipment, capable of carrying out their own projects.

It obviously was a lot more difficult to map out the long-term future of the video resource. That was very much bound to the changing needs and development of the community itself. This fact, when combined with the uncertainties of the rapidly expanding technology of half-inch video, made it impossible to project with any finality the future shape of the experiment. Nevertheless, the video group foresaw a time when it would become desirable to install a full and permanent video-studio facility as an accessible educational and communications resource in the area.

In order to finance the operations the CAC video group approached a number of grant giving bodies who came forward with small contributions to cover equipment and some wages.² Andy Porter and Alfonso Santana became responsible for the day-to-day running of the project. Andy complemented his meagre wage with teaching at Goldsmith and Fonce had to live without any money at all. The other four members — including Ken Lynam, who joined the group full-time one year later — had outside job commitments and therefore could only help out as volunteers.

To publicise the beginning of the scheme leaflets were distributed to all groups supporting the CAC. In this way the existence of a video resource was made widely known.

Andy: «There was the whole discussion about initiation versus demand, and that is what was really important during the first six months. In fact there was very little demand — naturally enough — as video was so new to the area. It had to be all initiation. We were getting involved absolutely in anything and everything without making any sort of priorities about what subjects to cover.

One-off recordings and replays

A good opportunity to introduce video and experiment with it in an informal way was the recording of outings, events, festivals, and parties. People got a chance to see themselves on telly. For the video group those events were instrumental in seeing how people responded to video and to learn how to operate the equipment in a relaxed manner without having to worry too much about scripts and the functional use of the tapes. Here is one example:

Epping Forest. By request of the CAC the video equipment was taken on an outing to Epping Forest and was used by anybody who wished to shoot something. It was an occasion for people getting to know the equipment, and the resulting tape gave a good impression of how the day felt. It was shown back before a CAC meeting on the following Wednesday and everybody had fun watching it.³

Video neighbourhood work in the Powis Square area

A more systematic use of the equipment began around Powis Square, a Victorian residential area with a high percentage of immigrants living in overcrowded conditions.

Andy: «I had almost done my apprenticeship around Powis Square through my work as a playleader. I felt up to a point, no longer to be considered an outsider because I not only had worked there over a period of time, but I had got married while there, and had kids. When you have kids you become automatically much more part of the community. And so I was meeting people not as a community worker or as a community activist, but as a person who lived in the area.»

Powis Square Open Day.

The development of video neighbourhood work over the summer began on a low-key level. It all started with the recording of the Powis Square Open Day. This was a very important festival celebrating the end of a long history of struggle, not only to get the Square opened for the residents, but to actually get it converted into an adventure playground with proper facilities and staffing (see appendix 4 for Jan O'Malley's account of the struggle for the opening of Powis Square).

Andy Porter: «We had two portapacks and two teams shooting the Open Day celebrations. We then replayed the tapes on the square the same evening. And it was really amazing. Thirty kids and adults crowding around a little screen. And we also got other people to do interviews although we did all the camera work. And the interviewed people came back to see themselves on the telly.»

The Powis Square history tape.

The enthusiasm aroused during the replay of the Powis Square Open Day tape led to the idea of producing a history tape covering the several year long struggle.

Andy: «The idea was to reconstruct the struggle using the material from the Open Day as a starting point. We wanted to show local people that we could produce more sophisticated tapes as well. By the time we got round doing it - in October - people had seen the video gear used quite a lot in the summer, but they didn't realise there were more possibilities and we felt it was our job to go a step further.»

So the group portrayed the different stages of the struggle. They videotaped material from old newspapers at the public library and some old photographs. Interviews with people who had participated in the struggles were carried out. A crude sound-track was added with the use of a cheap Philips tape recorder. The final tape was an attempt to highlight people's struggles and achievements rather than to analyse the politics involved. The tape was shown at the first annual general meeting of the Playhut where it was a reminder to those who had been involved and an introduction to those who were still new to the area and to the Square's history.

Workshops with children.

Although the video group was originally not intending to take on much work with kids during the first six months of the project, the one-off recording and replaying the group was doing on Powis Square led to demands

both from the kids and the playleaders. So the video group organised workshops one day a week in the summer months. The kids used video to record themselves doing sports activities, role plays, or generally playing about.

Summing-up.

The variety of video projects around Powis Square proved that the resource could work in a number of ways and at a number of levels which were inter-dependent and feeding off each other.

Andy: «The development of the video neighbourhood work over the summer demonstrates this on a small scale. The initial one-off recordings and playbacks gave people the opportunity to make demands on the use of the equipment which could be met in their terms, either using it themselves, but mostly saying where it should be used. Record this, record that. Can you replay it on Wednesday? Can you replay that bit again? Let's have a look. Can my friends see it some time? After this came the demand for the edited tape of the Open Day, and the demand for the kids' workshops. Finally, I contributed the idea for the history tape and was given the job to get on and do it.

«We saw this cross-fertilising process as a pattern for the video resource as a whole — recorded material would be used in a variety of ways over a period of time, involving a series of different relationships between people and the resource.»

Videotapes for information and discussion

In parallel to the work around Powis Square and the one-off recordings, other project work was taken on through contacts with other groups under the CAC umbrella. Most of the groups wanted to use video either to produce an audio-visual document about their particular activities to show to interested individuals or to grant-giving bodies. In that way they could give a comprehensive picture of who they were and what they were doing. Other groups wished to document a problem or a struggle in the community or to create discussion about it.

Caribbean Arts Festival.

The first, most direct demand came from the Caribbean Cultural International to cover their one-week arts festival. This involved the recording of two poetry readings and of the photographs, paintings, and crafts on display. They told the video group what to shoot, when to shoot, and then said

what to edit together. They took total control of the process and at the end bought the tape because they wanted to keep it to raise funds. There were technical difficulties with the tape. The main problem was poor lighting conditions. But the tape could still be used effectively for fundraising.

Ashburnham Community Centre.

One of the volunteers of the video group had been working at the Ashburnham Community Centre. On behalf of the video group, Ken Lynam approached the management of the Centre with a view to making a tape about the centre's activities and its relationship to the surrounding district. After discussion, the idea was accepted and throughout the summer material was collected. The tape concentrated on everyday life at the centre and was seen very much as an advert for the Association. It was replayed at one of the Association's meetings. Criticism of the tape cited its crude form. It was considered too lengthy with bad sound quality. This was unfortunate because a large audience of about 150 people watched the tape. A better quality of the tape would have made the replay a great success. (Further examples see appendix 5).

Both projects show that the video group still had to learn more about the basic techniques and build up experience of how to adequately replay a tape within a given context. Then there was the need for buying some more accessories: lights and better microphones.

Action tapes

Another area of development was the use of video in situations where a group of people were taking action on an issue.

The Housing Trust Campaign.

A first opportunity for using video as a tool for action came with the request from various people within the CAC for tapes to be made with some tenants in the area who were experiencing problems with the Housing Trust. Interviews were taped and shown to a number of people in the CAC. The general feeling was that as a next step the tapes should be edited down to single ones which would then be presented as the tenants' point of view to a Housing Trust Tenants Meeting. As part of the animation process the video group, in conjunction with the CAC photo group and the printshop, put an exhibition together for the meeting, focusing on some of the issues involved and visualising, with the use of graphic material, the operational structure of the Housing Trust. During the meeting the management com-

mittee of the trust were forced to identify themselves and come to the front of the meeting to answer questions. The whole event was videotaped.

Ken: «There was an explosive atmosphere. A lot of feeling was generated because a young epileptic woman had died a couple of days before. The Housing Trust had continually refused to rehouse her and her father; and she died because there was no one to look after her when she had a fit. When we played the tape back people thought it was great in helping them to put forward their arguments in a more systematic way. They then encouraged us to make a comprehensive tape on the failures of the Housing Trust's policy. But in the end we were left to do it on our own, and we found ourselves in a vacuum.»

Was there no action group to carry on with the campaign?

Andy: «The people in the CAC wanted to make a centred attack upon the structure and role of the Housing Trust with the aim of making it more flexible to the needs of the tenants.»

Ken: «But what it boiled down to in reality was that they only had energy to have a go at the Trust once a year; which we didn't see at the time.»

Eventually the video group pulled out. The failed project raised some basic questions about the operational context in which video was to function. Obviously the CAC activists had not succeeded in pushing the issue further and involving the tenants in campaigning. Although the video group had enough material to produce a more in-depth action tape, they were unwilling to develop it in a vacuum. In retrospect that now seems the right decision. Video can only play an effective role when there is already some action under-way. Video cannot create, but can only stimulate action.

The Wheatstone Road scandal.

A more successful attempt at producing an action tape was launched together with some residents at Wheatstone Road. There people had to put up with appalling conditions: leaking roofs, crumbling walls, overflowing toilets, rats, and infectious diseases. A Law Centre worker involved with the Wheatstone Road Tenants Association was trained to use the equipment and then, together with a member of the tenants association, he went round videotaping interviews with the tenants and taking shots of their housing conditions. Subsequently the comments of a local doctor were added about hygienic problems. All the contacts as well as the interviews were made by the member of the tenants association. The tape was played back at a meeting for local tenants, but due to a mix-up of dates, councillors were unable to attend.

The BBC then followed up a local newspaper article on the tenants' video tape, and went on to make a film of their own on conditions in the area for the *Cause for Concern* spot on *Nationwide*. An off-air recording of this was made by the video group and added to the existing tenants tape. Both programmes were then replayed to a meeting of tenants and councillors. At this meeting the Council gave firm commitments as to the timing of the re-housing in the area.

Andy: «People like councillors and from the Housing Trust were really having their faces rubbed on the television screen and were confronted with the dirt they had some kind of responsibility for. There was quite shocking material on that tape. And it was put together by local people. It had given them the power not to just shout and rave at the authorities about how bad conditions were. It allowed them to express themselves, to actually bring their living conditions right into the very room where they were meeting the councillors; where they were totally undeniable.»

The Wheatstone Road project is also instructive because it allows a comparison with the BBC's approach to cover the same subject with so-called *professional* methods. The tenants' tape has a power and authenticity lost in the more theatrical and glamorous 'tea-time' telly spot of the BBC. Both the BBC's and the tenants' tapes have been widely shown to student audiences to demonstrate the differences of the two approaches.

Off-air

At one point in the Wheatstone Road project the video group made use of national television by recording a programme *off-air* and showing it back to a particularly concerned audience. The video group continued to take off-airs from all sorts of programmes and distributed them along different kinds of communication networks in the community. A BBC programme on the National Front went round the youth club circuit, and to the Campaign against Racism. Another BBC production — a film on the riots during the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival — was taken for discussion purposes in youth clubs as well. Everywhere the off-air material was used in an interactive way. People talked about the implications of what they had seen, which made it different from how they usually consume mass-media info. This use of off-airs also made the group aware that if they could produce similar material of intrinsic interest and good quality, there was enough demand in the community for it to be distributed for discussion and action along similar lines.

Training and access to the equipment

One of the aims of the pilot project was to involve as many people as possible in project work, teach them the basic skills and de-mystify the medium. How was this idea put into practice? At the beginning of the scheme Andy was the person with most skills. As the project developed, skills were passed on to other members in the group, especially to Fonce who learnt the technical and communications skills from scratch. The group accumulated knowledge and experience. Much time was spent on improvising with limited equipment where additional equipment would have solved the problems right away.

Therefore not enough equipment and time could be set aside for training many people. But when training was provided it was always tied to people who wanted to do a particular project. That is how the video group like to see the equipment being used anyway. People should learn skills relating to what they actually want to do with it.

Training took place on two levels. Either people learned the simple recording skills (camera, VTR controls, microphone) right on the spot for the recording of a one-off event, or people were taught to a level where they could use the equipment independently of the resource. This took longer and usually involved a period of trial and error. This had the disadvantage that people often learned by their mistakes in situations where it mattered. It has also meant that the equipment had been moved around a lot and suffered the wear and tear of several users. This caused inevitable maintenance and repair problems — the greatest difficulty being that, with limited equipment, breakdowns sometimes forced the projects to a complete standstill.

Summing up

The blossoming of all kinds of video activities during the pilot scheme resulted in a variety of different approaches, functions, and forms of video use. The projects embraced a broad range of issues: community centres, play, housing, arts, street culture, and educational issues of great local relevance. The forms of video production varied considerably, reflecting the different functions of the projects. The one-off recordings and play-backs were the most simple in terms of employed video skills. There was something important about festivals and events appearing on the TV-monitor. It reinforced people's sense of being able to get things together themselves.

The workshops did not acquire highly developed editing skills either. More difficult from a technical point of view were the tapes for information, discussion, and action. To assemble a series of interviews and location shots demands some basic editing skills — even more so when a voice-over commentary was needed. The most developed stage was reached with the Powis Square history tape, which was the first successful attempt at refined production. It had been systematically planned and edited, had a voice-over commentary, and included music, photos, graphics, and other visual material from newspapers.

The value of an open resource was that it could operate on all those different levels, covering the spectrum from *process* to *product* video. The idea of an open resource had been best demonstrated with the video neighbourhood work in the Powis Square area. There the equipment was located at the very roots of the community, and one project led organically to the next, setting a chain-reaction process in motion.

Not all of the projects had been successful. The pilot scheme showed how important it was to carefully consider the socio-political use of a tape even to achieve minimum impact on a given audience. But amazing results like the Wheatstone Road action tape encouraged the group to go on with their experiment of developing an open community video resource. Andy summed up the feeling of the group after the first six months in the following way:

«We wanted to go ahead on all fronts. We wished to produce another sophisticated product tape and see it distributed more effectively than the Powis Square history tape. But we also wanted to go ahead with the one-off recordings of events and festivals, refusing to narrow down our vision of video being useful in various ways. We felt that all the projects we'd done had been valid except for the obvious failures. But we still needed a lot more clarity about what we were doing.»

Struggle for survival

The pilot scheme had generated a lot of enthusiasm among the video group members, the occasional users of the equipment, and among local people who had seen video in action in different situations. The project had matured to the point where some of the work could be complemented with further experiments in order to expand and refine the roles that the open resource had been playing during the pilot scheme.

But it soon became apparent that because of severe financial restrictions the video group would be unable to follow up all the work initiated during the first six months. The application to the Community Arts Panel of the Arts Council, from whom the video group was hoping for wages and running costs, had been turned down despite written support from sixteen local groups. This was partly due to the lack of understanding of the nature and value of *process video*. But it was also due to the bad reputation that the Community Action Centre in Notting Hill had among grant-giving bodies generally.

In the long run the CAC proved to be incapable of keeping the initial drive and momentum up. The organisation shared the same fate as the *People's Association* in 1969, which split up because of continuous in-fighting. It turned out to be far too ambitious to bring all the different groups together under one roof.

The disintegrating of the Community Action Centre had a lasting negative effect on the financing strategies of the video group during the following two years. For Andy Porter the lack of financial support meant that he had to remain on the dole, and for Fonce Santana that he had to continue to survive without any money at all. Whatever grant-money came in had to be spent on buying additional equipment, tapes, and to cover general running costs. The Greater London Arts Association awarded a grant of £500 expressly for the purpose of providing breathing space to look for other sources of finance.

Despite these restrictions the group carried on as if they had been a fully-funded resource, limiting the quantity but not the variety of project work. They continued their kids workshops, responded to an ongoing demand to do one-offs, like, for example, the videotaping of an Afro-West Indian music and dance performance. Then there were a number of replays of existing tapes.

Another development was the writing of a report based on the experiences of the first six months. It was a 25-page document giving an account of what had happened, including a theoretical chapter justifying and explaining the use of video as a most flexible media tool for community communication. This report was printed by the CAC printshop. 500 copies were distributed to grant-giving bodies, activists, and local people interested in the experiment. The function of the report was not just to spread the word about community video and to attract funding, but was also an opportunity

for the video group members to clarify and digest the accumulated experience.

The rest of the group's energy was invested in exploring new territory.

Getting everybody involved: a process tape

One striking element in the Wheatstone Road project about housing problems was the fact that one of the tenants became directly involved in the making of the tape. She was carrying out the interviews, and it was probably due to her involvement that the tenants felt free to talk about their living conditions in an uninhibited way, in contrast to when they were interviewed by a professional BBC reporter. He used the tenants as actors within his own play. Would it be possible to involve people even more in the making process, not just in the interviewing but in the planning and editing as well?

The Murchison Tenants Tape

Andy recalls the making of their first process tape: «It happened that a tenant from Peplar House in Murchison Road - a street not far from Wheatstone Road and situated in the same redevelopment area - had seen the Wheatstone Road tape at a public meeting and some months later approached us asking if we would help him to make a videotape about his housing estate. Peplar House and Thompson House are only about ten years old but already gave cause for complaints about maintenance and repair problems. And then there was this general nuisance created by the huge building site of the redevelopment area across the road. Ken Rason, an electrician, wanted to make a short tape on the problems of the estate for playback at a meeting of tenants at which he wished to encourage the formation of a tenants association. We agreed and a creative process got off the ground.»

In retrospect the whole process can be seen in several stages:

- «In one afternoon Ken Rason made a tape which dealt with the particular problems facing the tenants in Peplar and Thompson Houses. He carried out the interviews and directed the camera work, which was done by a law centre worker who had been previously trained by us from the video group.
- «This tape was played back at a meeting called for local tenants and was shown alongside some slides of well-designed housing estates. The replay prompted a lot of discussion of the issues involved. The tenants wanted

to do something about their housing situation and as a first move a committee was elected with the job of setting up a properly constituted tenants association.

- «Encouraged by the response to the initial tape, Ken Rason, who had been elected chairperson of the association, wanted to go on and make a more comprehensive tape covering the neighbourhood as a whole. With the assistance of video workers he started by taking general shots of the area, directing the camera work as he composed a story line in his head. The tape showed the wider environmental problems that an estate like Peplar and Thompson Houses have to put up with in North Kensington: motorways, railways, the closing of local shops, the anonymous living conditions of a transient community, and the dirt, noise and danger of an on-going redevelopment process which is getting on people's nerves.
- «On the following Sunday we took the replay and recording equipment onto the street outside the flats. This generated a lot of interest and Ken Rason, with one of us on the camera, did a number of interviews with tenants and their kids. These interviews were played back on the spot and triggered comments and further discussions. Main dissatisfactions of the tenants: although the buildings were only ten years old they had rising damp. The nearby building sites were unsafe for the children, little play provision for small children, inconvenient shopping facilities, lack of a community centre, and most of all, a frightening lack of community spirit.
- «Then Ken Rayson played these two tapes back to the committee members at their meeting the following Wednesday, stopping the replay at various points to explain what he was intending to say and getting people to discuss the points. At the end a discussion took place about what the important parts were and what else needed to be added. People felt that the two major omissions were firstly, nothing about the particular problems of the older kids, and secondly, the state of the shopping facilities in the area. It was arranged to get these covered. Then Monica showed a lot of photographs of what the streets used to be like in the past and of the street parties that used to go on. She had brought them along because of the previous Sunday's discussion about the lack of community spirit. It was suggested to include these photographs in some form in the tape.
- «Some time later, Monica's photographs were mounted on an exhibition board outside the flats. This attracted other tenants to come and see. One of the tenants interviewed Monica about the photos. This eventually led

to a discussion of the condition of the area, which a number of people joined. A woman raised the problem of small stones being flipped from the railway tracks at the back of the house by the quickly passing inter-city trains. Ken Rason went with her round the back to videotape a broken window and to interview her about the incident. By this time quite a crowd had gathered, so we played back the interviews with Monica about the old photographs, followed, when Ken Rason returned, by the interview about the broken window. As well as being a useful evening for creating more material for the final tape, it was also an enjoyable event with kids and parents out on the street until it was dark, just like the old days.

- «Ken Rason asked for the editing to be done locally and arranged for us, on a Sunday, to use the hall of the adventure playground down the road. The editing was directed by Ken Rason and Monica, with Fonce and Andy doing the actual mechanics of editing and joining in the discussion of controversial points, for example, what to put next. The process started with Monica annotating the tapes. She then supplied us with information of where to find all the different items on the different tapes that had been shot over the previous month. Ken Rason took the responsibility for the overall framework of the tape. The tape lasted for 45 minutes. The editing started at about 1.00 pm and finished after 10.00 pm.
- «Two weeks later the edited tape was replayed to a meeting of the tenants association and served as a helpful discussion starter.» (CAC video report, 1976)

The Murchison tape is a classic example of how *process video* can work at its best. Like a chain-reaction one step led to the other, each contributing new elements to the informational and emotional network built up among the residents. The underlying aim of the video project was to focus the tenants' interest on a collective research process into their own housing situation. Each tenant involved in the tape contributed facts, opinions, and feelings; thus adding an emotional dimension to the process often absent with more traditional fact-gathering techniques like surveys.

The video project was instrumental in rousing interest for the newly formed tenants association. The video group played a very low-key, supportive role, passed on their recording skills, but also participated in the discussion about the script. They contributed an outside point of view rather than

dominating the procedure as experts pretending to know more than the tenants themselves.

The further development of the tenants association was encouraging. They were offered representation on the Housing Trust Committee. They succeeded in getting improvements for their basement area. And a year later they obtained a massive rate rebate, arguing that the long and weary redevelopment process in their neighbourhood had decreased the value of their estate considerably. In 1976 they organised a lively street party.

This development cannot be directly credited to the initial video project, but it was certainly decisive in strengthening the links between the tenants and in bringing the tenants association off the ground. There was also an educational spin-off effect from the Murchison Road project:

Andy: «A teacher at the local primary school was at the meeting when the very first tape of the project was shown to the tenants. She approached Ken Rason asking him for help on a project on pollution in the area which she was doing with a group of six kids from her class. Ken Rason persuaded her to get the kids to use the video equipment themselves. Then Ken Rason put her in contact with us from the video group. We went to the school and arranged two sessions — the first to train the kids on the equipment and the second to make the tape. The kids took to operating the equipment easily and in the second session did all the camera work and interviewing with tenants from Murchison Road, the clerk of works of the building site and the playleader at the adventure playground. The videotape, together with other documentary material on pollution, was entered in a national competition, winning first prize out of 200 schools, which gave them all a week's holiday to Yorkshire.»

The St. Andrews-tape was a link between school and its surrounding community, and helped to bridge the gap between children and the adult world. Media projects in schools often concern themselves with the analysis of national television culture. In this case the medium was actively used by the children to make their own programme.

Getting the message to a wider audience: a product tape.

So far all of the CAC video projects had been initiated locally and were aimed at local audiences. But what about issues of regional or even national importance, which have already undergone a political structuring process at a local, regional, and national level? What role could a video resource play in feeding information and discussion material into regional organisations and campaign processes?

A first opportunity to get involved in production came in autumn 1976 when London's pensioner movement launched a three day action of lobbying and demonstration in support of a heating allowance.

The pensioners' heating campaign

The organisers of the event, the British Pensioners and Trades Union Action Committee together with the London Region-Group were chiefly concerned with the raising of pensioners' poor living standards. They demanded that a single pensioner should have half of the national average industrial wage and a married couple three-quarters. In 1976, that meant a single pensioner should have received £46 a week instead of the meagre £13.30 they actually got. While the basic increase of pensions is the principle objective of the pensioners movement, the three-day lobbying campaign in autumn 1976 highlighted the catastrophic situation of many old people in winter and forced the Government to give in to the short-term demand for a heating allowance before Christmas. A 48 hour vigil was organised outside the home of Mr. David Ennals, then Minister for Health and Social Security. A petition of 20,000 signatures was handed in to 10 Downing Street and on the third day of protest a mass rally was held in Trafalgar Square. There two speakers addressed the demonstration:

«Why are we demonstrating? We are the generation which made the Welfare State. Make no mistake about that. We worked for a National Health Service, we worked for a better educational welfare programme, we worked for welfare for everybody, so that the poverty which we knew in our youth would not be our children's poverty. And what do we find today? We find that the Welfare State and the Health Service which we made and fought for for so many years has been undermined.

«We mean to get from this Government a pension on which we can live with decency. So that we shall spend the rest of our lives not sitting in the corner but standing up as an integral part of the rest of the community and living with the dignity which we deserve.» (Transcript of the pensioners' heating campaign tape)

The pensioners' heating campaign tape.

The idea of making a tape about the pensioners' heating campaign developed spontaneously out of Ken Lynam's involvement with Task Force. He knew about the vigil and about the pensioners' deputation to David Ennals. BBC News had covered the first day of protest and a worker from Task Force suggested taking an off-air of that to show it the next day to the pensioners on the vigil. The off-air of the BBC programme was

replayed at a community centre near the vigil, where the pensioners from all over London were arriving to support the demonstrators.

Then Ken decided to videotape some more material and add it to the off-air recording and possibly develop the idea as a small project. Together with a contact person from the action-committee he started to make interviews. They talked to someone who had been there all night, to another woman about why there was this week of campaigning, to another about the local work of pensioners groups and about the arduous preparations for the event, like gathering petitions and planning publicity. Then some shots were made of a group of pensioners singing. A Task Force worker took a portapack and covered the rally at Trafalgar Square. At the end all kinds of bits and pieces had been collected on the three days' protest. The material was so exciting that Ken wished to turn it into an edited tape, which could then be replayed to pensioners who were not organised or involved in campaigning, to show them what a strong pensioners' movement was able to do.

First only a roughly edited version was put together. That tape was taken to the pensioners' action-committee who looked at it and suggested several alterations, but generally they were quite pleased with the outcome. Then Ken and the other Task Force worker did a final edit and the tape was premiered at a London Region meeting which was attended by delegates of local pensioners groups. From that moment a lot of bookings started to come in. The initial showings were requested by groups that were already involved in the London Region and in the organising of the vigil. It was very encouraging for them to see an audio-visual document about their activities. Then the tape started to go to those pensioners clubs that were not so well organised, and again it elicited a good response, although the audiences tended to express admiration without making a link between the action on the monitor and themselves.

Ken: «I think that a lot more planning should have gone into the distribution of the tape. It should have involved the London Region more by sending a speaker around with it, which I think would have immediately placed more emphasis on discussion afterwards and not so much on the consumption of the tape. The outcome of the discussions could have been fed back to the London Region so that there would be more of a two-way flow. I always tried to stimulate discussion, but it was not the same coming from me as it would have been from one of the pensioners on the tape. But in terms of numbers of showings the project was a real success. We even get some requests now, eighteen months later. Over thirty groups have seen it,

approximately 1500 people. I think that if we had pushed it more we could have fed it into organisations, like the Association of London Housing Estates, the London Council of Social Services, or the National Federation of Pensioners, which is a huge organisation.»

What were the main difficulties in making such a regional campaign tape?

Ken: «Technically it is not very good. The machinery we were using was a bit dud. Some of the material on the rally was shot on a National and edited on a Sony, so it does not run very well. Then some of the arguments on the tape are not clear enough. Perhaps there should have been a little bit more about how the issue of heating is linked to the demand for a decent pension. And one pensioner criticised the tape for not actually saying where the extra money for the pensioners should come from. So that needs to be raised as a political issue. Then the making of the tape was very much a rush job; we could have planned it better.

«In terms of the development of our video resource the pensioners heating campaign tape highlighted for the first time the question of distribution. We had to do all the showings ourselves and for that we had to travel vast distances sometimes. It was quite a drain on our resources to go across the city and involve one or two people in transport. It would have been much better for other local video groups to have a copy of our tape and show it. The problem of distribution has to be solved if video is going to get beyond an immediate struggle for which a tape is made.»

The pensioners' heating campaign tape reached the largest audience of any tape up to that point. The target audience consisted of many small groups, which provided perfect conditions for low-key video replays. The project also proved the effectiveness of the medium: official TV news coverage could be quickly integrated in the production of the tape, and the costs of production were incredibly low compared to 16mm film. But the actual success of the tape depended on the particular context from which it had come — Ken's practical experience as a community worker enabled him to understand the mechanics of the campaign and to grasp quickly in what way the distribution of the tape could be structured to widen the impact of the campaign.

The pensioners' heating campaign tape also demonstrated the difficulties of how to make a product tape in the context of a regional movement. What was revealed was the need for better editing facilities. Also closer involvement of the campaigners themselves is needed to improve the content of a campaign tape. The feed-back mechanisms have to be intensified. Finally,

regional distribution has to be improved, if community video groups do not want to be worn out by doing all the replays themselves.

Summing up

Although the video group had to go through a rough period of survival, stage two of the experiment was useful in clarifying two major approaches representing both ends of the community video spectrum: the use of video either at the micro or macro level of community politics.

The Murchison project explored the process characteristics of video showing that putting the equipment into the hands of an active group of local people can generate exciting interactive processes within and around that group, facilitating the growth of group identity.

For the first time the pensioners' heating campaign tape proved that a community video resource can also go beyond doing process work within a geographically bound community and produce a campaign tape for distribution on a regional level. In order to have maximum impact such a campaign tape had to obey better standards of production. It was geared towards visual effectiveness.

But both process and product video share a common philosophy: to draw people in to the making of a tape who are directly affected by an issue. The community video worker is seen as an enabling link-person helping a group of people to put their message across to whatever audience they want to reach.

Stage two of the experiment left the video group with a set of practical problems. Although they had been able to consolidate their work and to bring out more clearly the mechanisms of process and product video that development was not rewarded with financial stability. The group was either faced with folding up or existing at an even more reduced level as an entirely voluntary project that would not be able to sustain a genuinely experimental drive. Community arts money was definitely not yet to come and the seeding money from the Greater London Arts Association (GLAA) and other funding bodies was too little to survive on. Being on the dole was a continuous strain on the video group members. Without wages the resource was becoming impossibly stretched. With an uncertain future it was difficult to plan ahead, and the limited equipment did not allow the project to raise the quality of production. It became increasingly more arduous to further stimulate, discover, and explore the different dimensions of community video.

New possibilities of financing had to be discussed, especially the feasibility of continuing the media project within the Job Creation Programme (JCP) of the Manpower Services Commission. That would allow the group to become fully-paid workers, provided they offered work experience and training for some unemployed school-leavers. The group eventually decided to choose this last option as a way out of their dilemma.

A new chance to experiment: 'News at West 10'

The idea of a photographic and video News Service

There had been some discussion between the video and the photo group about the possibility of doing a local News Service. It was planned to be a fairly short and snappy videotape, intercutting bits of documentary about community issues with adds announcing local events. The idea of the News Service came out of the realisation that so far all media production had been geared towards existing community groups. It was felt to be important to explore the possibilities of video for informing and involving unorganised local people on community issues.

The Manpower Services Commission accepted the News Service proposal and came up with a £10,000 grant for a six-month period. The new project involved the training of unemployed school leavers in the use of video and photography and the production of a regular News Service for the Kensal area of London W. 10.

There were two reasons why the Kensal area in North Kensington was chosen for the project. Firstly, the video group members had established good contacts in the Murchison and Kensal area through a number of video projects. Secondly, the character of the area seemed to be of special relevance for a community communication experiment. It is an area of unrelated tower blocks and estates, blighted industrial development and empty of any social or cultural amenities. Many of its 3,000 inhabitants had been arbitrarily moved in with each new wave of redevelopment, starting in the 1950s and ending in 1972 when Trellick Tower, the last and biggest block was erected. The mindless urban development policy resulted in a mish-mash of people settling down in the area with no natural links between them. This situation was creating racial tension as well as distrust between old people, worrying about peace and safety, and hundreds of kids feeling trapped in a concrete cage with no space to play. Therefore the Kensal and Murchison area provided an ideal situation to see whether a photographic

and video News Service could stimulate any discussion about the neighbourhood at the few existing meeting points in the community.

The *News at WEST 10*-experiment (West 10 indicating the postal district) foresaw the production of a series of ten to twenty minute news tapes covering issues and activities relevant to the neighbourhood. The tapes would be regularly shown at a number of well-advertised local venues — pensioners clubs, the two adventure playgrounds, the health centre and mums and toddlers clubs. Along with photo exhibitions the tapes could also take to the streets where they would be replayed from the back of a van.

The project team

Because there were wages for only two members of the video group it was agreed that Andy and Fonce, who had been living on the dole for the longest time, would go on the Job Creation Project as the video coordinators and that Ken, who had been fully employed till autumn 1976, would remain on the dole, but work on the project as a full-time volunteer. The photographers, Rose Fisher and Alex Bowling, became responsible for the photographic side of the News Service. Shortly before the project was launched in February 1977 the author of this report, Heinz Nigg, joined the team as an action-researcher. He monitored the experiment and towards the end of the project wrote a first preliminary report for the Manpower Services Commission.

Then the four school leavers had to be selected by interview. All of them — one girl and three boys — had some limited job experience, but were quite disappointed about the kind of work they had been given to do. Anne was employed at a bingo hall; Leroy, a West Indian, had been sorting out nails and screws; Brendan had ended up in a carpentry job sweeping the floor; and Chris had been a stocktaker at a Church Furnishers. They were excited about the prospect of working on a training scheme where they would learn relatively sophisticated skills compared with their previous jobs. Although at that time they had not the slightest clue of what it would be like to work on a community News Service.

The vicar of one of the local churches agreed to let out two rooms of the empty St. Thomas Church Hall for a pepper corn rent, so that the project could operate from a temporary base right in the Kensal area itself.

Publicising the News Service in the project area

To publicise the beginning of the project, the News at West 10 team organised a photographic and video exhibition in St. Thomas Church Hall. The chosen theme for the show focused on the question *What's it like living in Kensal?* Lots of video interviews were carried out in the streets of Kensal, and several members of local groups brought forward their opinions on the lack of amenities. Photographs were taken in the pubs, the pensioners clubs, and the Health Centre. At the end of an intensive two-week period, enough material had been gathered to mount a whole exhibition.

For the adults in the enlarged project team it was a first opportunity to work together in a new setting and to get to know more about the community. It was an extraordinarily creative atmosphere to work in, and everybody felt the excitement of getting drawn into a rather adventurous undertaking.

The exhibition was a big surprise. More than 100 people visited the church hall on the open day. The photographs were mounted on exhibition boards, which sectioned up the whole space into smaller environments. The video tapes were played back on two monitors in two opposite corners of the hall. People could request whatever they wanted to see from a big list of titles, not only new tapes made in Kensal, but also productions from the previous year. Tea, orange juice, and biscuits were served, and people sat down at tables in an improvised cafe corner. In one of the smaller rooms adjacent to the hall video interviews were conducted with two pensioners who had been living in Kensal all their lives and were eager to talk about the past. Most of the visitors were pensioners and children. But also the leaders from the Kensal Community Association were present, and the exhibition created the right atmosphere to talk informally about the possibilities of the forthcoming News Service.

Training

Once the trainees had been selected and the project publicised in the locality, the next move was to set up a training scheme for the school leavers. So the project was started with an initial three-week training period during which the trainees could pick up enough basic skills to participate on the production of the pilot news programme at the end of March. The assumption behind the Job Creation Project was that even if none of the school leavers found jobs in the field of photography or video, the work experience as such would be sufficiently stimulating to strengthen their self-

confidence to look more constructively and critical at their job prospects and take some action when the scheme came to an end.

The four trainees had to choose between the photo and the video group, but were promised that at a later stage they would get an opportunity to learn more about the medium they had not specialised in. The days were split in two. During the mornings theoretical instruction in the darkroom and the video studio took place. The afternoons were spent outside, practising shooting skills.

During the initial training period the adult organisers of the project began to realise how difficult the experiment was going to be. Training proved to be more arduous than expected. Amazingly enough all of the News at West 10 team stuck together for the six months, except Le roy who left after the first three weeks. Maggie, 20, a woman living in the area and interested in the CAC media groups, took his place.

There were other things to do apart from training. The two rooms at St. Thomas Church Hall needed cleaning up and painting. Workbenches, shelves, and electricity had to be installed. The darkroom remained at 45 Kensington Park Road, but all the rest — office and video gear — was eventually moved up to Kensal. Another important event was the hiring of a *National* editing deck with grant money from GLAA. The group was eventually able to buy this badly needed piece of equipment which allowed for a much smoother editing process. The editing deck and a second portapack, which was purchased with help from a charity, provided the necessary production conditions for the planned newsprogrammes.

The video News Service

The following account concentrates on the videosite of the News Service and touches the photography project and its development only marginally.

News programme One

During the training period plans were drawn up for a first News Service production. The idea was to report on several local issues, advertise existing local services and events and link the different items together with a self-composed jingle. Suggestions for the different news items had been popping up during the preparations for the Open Day exhibition when the project workers talked a lot with people in the area and through that experience learned about the ongoing activities and the most immediate problems in Kensal. A final list of themes was put together: childminders in Kensal, the

cuts in the Borough's services, a report on Meanwhile Gardens (another local job creation project), and a number of announcements and ads from the Health Centre, the Social Services area office, an Adult Education Institute, a local football club, a playgroup, an adventure playground, and local Jubilee organising committees. When the structure of the programme was set, a variety of things had to be done to actually produce the tape: arranging appointments with the people to be interviewed, carrying out the interviews, writing a script for each newsitem, deciding what visual material was going to be used and editing that material, writing up voice-over commentaries, putting them on audio-tape, etc.

Then the trainees had to be fitted into the complex and demanding production process, so that they had a real function within it. Chris proved to be a good speaker of voice-over commentary, and Anne and Brendan played their parts taping and making photographs. However, in the day to day work, they found it difficult to contribute substantially to the production.

Content of News Programme One:

● News at West 10 song

News comes easy News comes fast
Stuck between the ads it's a regular farce
Floods, crashes, victims they all rush past
But it's nothing to do with you or me.

News comes easy News comes fast
Famous people in their well-worn masks
They've made the news with an all star cast
What do they know about you or me?

We see and hear with no surprise
People think the telly's telling lies
Can't rely on its smooth disguise
Because we know it's not about you or me.

All the things that people do
Can be news if you want them to
Local News is here for you
To see yourself on TV.

● *Childminders in Kensal*

Report on problems that childminders encounter with registration. The report showed the need for more playgroups, a toy library, training courses and more subsidy. A childminder who gets £21 for looking after

three children spends £10 on expenses. Conclusion: the Council must put more resources into this service. Everyone in Kensal would benefit if more help was given to the childminders.

● *Advertisement*

Meeting times of childminders, mums and toddlers clubs, arts and crafts class, and of the pensioners' Tuesday club at the Health Centre.

● *Advertisement*

People who have damp in their flat in Holmfield House should contact the Social Services area office immediately.

● *Cuts in the Borough's services*

A general report on the cuts to be implemented by the Council for the coming year. A wide range of proposed cuts from Social Services to Housing, from Amenities to Health were totalling almost one million pounds. Some of the cuts included: the newly built, fully equipped Children's Home which was not going to be opened. The price of a meal in the Council's Luncheon Club was going up from 16p to 40p. Meals on wheels were supposed to go from 12p up to 18p. Council rents, already some of the highest in the country, were going to increase by 15%, and fewer repairs and renovations would be carried out. A £240 subsidy to the Blind Club was being cut; as well as weekly sweets and tobacco allowances for pensioners in homes. This was contrasted with the exorbitant expenditure of £13½ million on the new Town Hall, shortly to be opened. The building had three mayoral suites and £5000 was spent on flowers and plants. The £5000 alone would almost cover the cost of the subsidy to the Blind Club and the sweets and tobacco allowances for pensioners. Then the report informed about the growing opposition to the cuts. The Kensington and Chelsea Cuts Campaign put pressure on

CAC video report, 1976:

«The importance of community/alternative TV to us is twofold. Firstly, it is a means of making this medium available to ordinary people, to people who have no access to this language - a language which is immediate and powerful, yet with the development of portable equipment, fairly simple to use.

And secondly, in doing so, it begins to develop new communication processes in society, releasing information from new sources in a variety of directions; it frees the medium for use as a tool for exchanging ideas, explaining the world, for dialogue in an open and direct way.»



community organisation

KIDS TAPES

TENANTS TAPES

TEENAGERS TAPES

ORGANISATIONS TAPES

PENSIONERS TAPES

YOUR TAPES

MY TAPES

PEOPLES TAPES

SIGHTS AND
SOUNDS

VIDEO

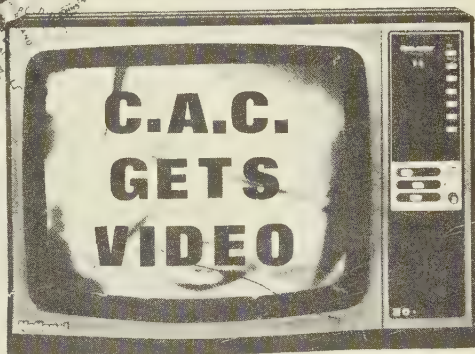
communication

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history

local
news

Fun

PLAY THE BACK TO YOUR MATES
TAKE THEM DOWN THE TOWN HALL
TO THE HOUSING TRUST
SHOW THEM AT SCHOOL
SHOW THEM AT YOUR SOCIAL CLUB
ON THE STREETS
AT THE TABERNACLE
TAKE THEM INTO COURT
KEEP THEM AS A RECORD



OUR OWN TELEVISION?



News at West 10 + team.

From left to right: Leroy (16, Westindian background), Alex (23, Guyana), Andy (32), Anne (16), Ken (27, Ireland), Brendan (17), Chris (17), Heinz (27, Switzerland), Rose (26, Malta), Alfonso (22, Spanish background).

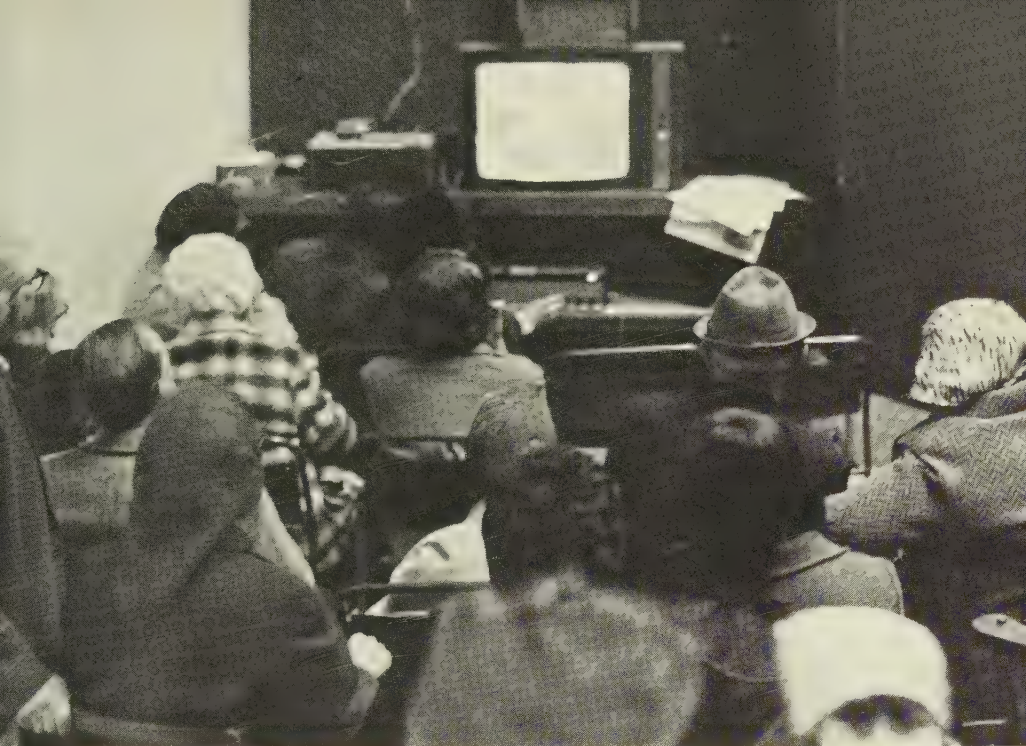
Trellick Tower

The Kensal area in North Kensington, London, is an area of unrelated tower blocks and estates, blighted industrial development and empty of any social or cultural amenities. Therefore the Kensal area provided an ideal situation to see whether a photographic and video news service could stimulate any discussion about the bleak state of affairs at the few existing meeting points in the community.

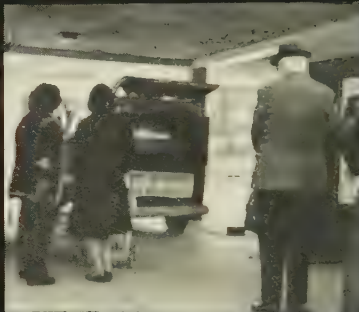
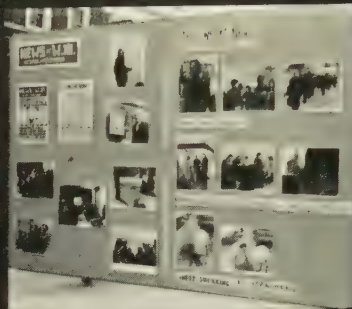








- To publicise the beginning of the project, the News at West 10 team organised a photographic and video exhibition in the disused *St. Thomas Church Hall*. More than 100 people visited the exhibition. Most of the visitors were pensioners and children.
- ◄ The photographic displays sectioned the whole space into smaller environments.
- ▲ The video tapes were played back on two monitors in two opposite corners of the hall.



News programmes.

Besides replaying the news programmes at the social meeting points in the community (pensioners clubs, mums and toddlers club, childminders group) they were also shown from the back of a van at Kensal's shopping precinct. On both sides of the vehicle several display boards were set up with general information on the news service. A series of photographs of everyday life in Kensal were mounted as well. ▲

Some items from Newsprogramme Two.

The newsprogramme was introduced with the News at West 10 — song. Visuals: Well-known intros from newsbroadcasting (1—3), then scenes from the local News Service at W. 10 (4—6). Speaker Chris introduces the different news items (7, 22, 30). ►

Drop-In Club in Trellick Tower (8—11):

The report on the opening of the new club consisted of interviews with some of the mothers about their reasons for coming with their babies.

Blind Club (12—14):

Portrait of Mrs. Murphy, a partially-sighted pensioner. She tells how the subsidy from the Council was cut.

Increases in the Council's Luncheon Club (15—18):

The Kensington Pensioners Action Association had organised a petition.

In an interview (18), Emmy Whitley, the chairwoman of the association, explained why the petition had been organised.



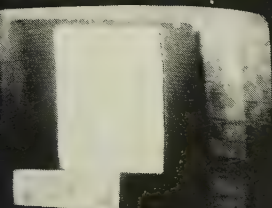
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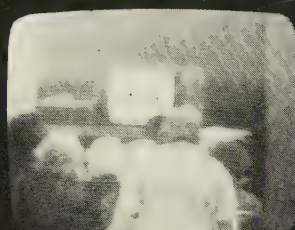
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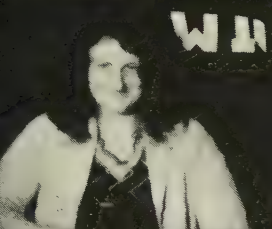
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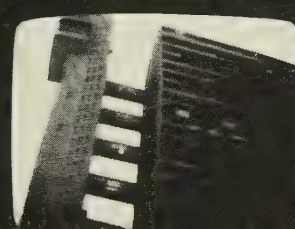
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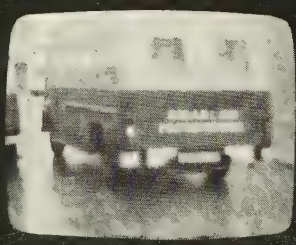
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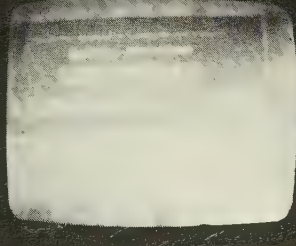
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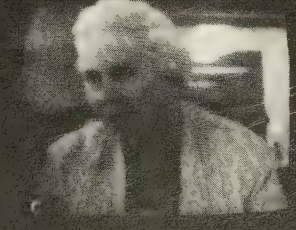
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Thursday 14th Feb
We had a very good time
at the school and had a
very good time at the
club
Jungle welcomed
all invited to jungle club



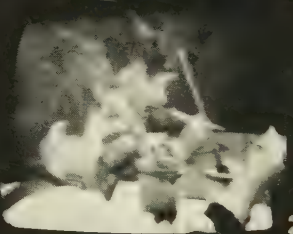
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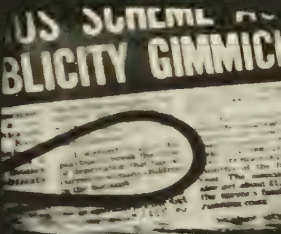
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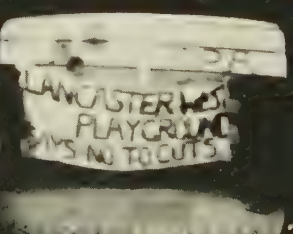
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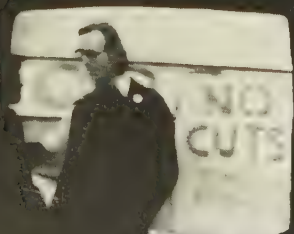
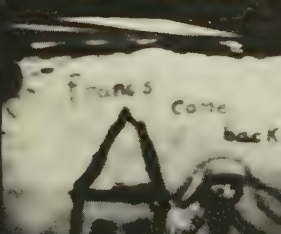
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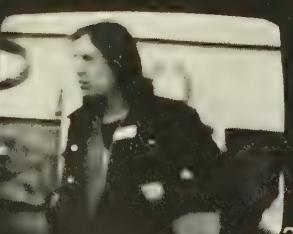
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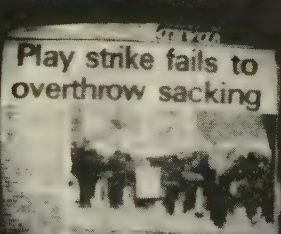
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the Council to reduce the cuts. A number of pickets had been organised all over the Borough. Although it was originally planned to cut over a million pounds, the final figure was less than that, and this was at least partly due to the pressure of the Cuts Campaign. That opposition to the cuts can be successful was illustrated with an example from Kensal. There, local people felt strongly about the proposed closure of their library. A petition was organised and the library saved. The report ended with the promise that the next news programme would bring further information on the cuts.

● *Advertisement*

A disco event for under-fives organised by the Golborn Mothers' Playgroup.

● *Advertisement*

A charity football match on Easter Monday in aid of local pensioners.

● *Advertisement*

Ad for an adult literacy scheme.

● *Jubilee preparations*

A short report on the local jubilee festival preparations by the Kensal Community Association and the Murchison Residents Association.

The end of the tape played out with some steelband music. Each item had been introduced with a jingle in order to bring a distinct pace into the 15 minute programme.

Advertisements (19–21):

Volunteers wanted to work on adult literacy scheme.

Jumble sale at the Health Centre in aid of the over 50s club.

Cutting the playbus (19–21):

The playbus (23) took kids to the seaside (24) and on other outings (25), was used by the playgrounds for their summer camp and by other groups as a mobile nursery (26) and play facility. The report uncovered the hypocrisy behind the cuts (27) by quoting some of the euphoric publicity nine months before when the Mayoress said in a press statement (22): «I wanted to give the playbus to break the cycle of deprivation that has occurred to so many children in the Borough.»

The sacking of Francis Prudeau (31–36):

The adventure playgrounds in Kensington and Chelsea had been savagely affected by the cuts with a total of nine redundancies. After a one-day strike and protest (31–32) the Management Committee of the Notting Hill Adventure Playground refused to reinstate Francis Prudeau (34), a playleader who had been with the playground for eight years. The News at W.10 team covered the event and reported on the plans for further action.

After three weeks the production was ready to be shown. It toured the pensioners club at the *Hut*, the pensioners' Tuesday Club, the Childminders' group, and the Mums and Toddlers' club. The response was mixed. At the *Hut* the programme was shown in the tea break between two bingo sessions. Because nobody introduced the replay properly the pensioners did not quite know what the whole thing was about. The reactions at the Tuesday Club were more lively, but no real discussion took place. More talking was stimulated at the meetings of the childminders and the mums and toddlers because the smaller size of the groups encouraged informal discussion. The first replay experience demonstrated that it certainly needed time to introduce a new idea to people.

Then the news programme was shown from the back of a van at Kensal's shopping precinct. On both sides of the vehicle several display boards were set up with general information on the News Service, so that passers-by would know right away what it was about. A series of photographs of everyday life in Kensal was mounted as well. The news programme was seen by about 50 people. But only a few stopped long enough to actually watch the programme in its entirety. An old age pensioner invited us for a cup of tea. He did not agree with the news item about the childminders. He recalled that in the old days none of these services had existed and people still helped each other out. Although we could not agree with him, we thought that such discussions would help to clarify people's opinions and feelings.

The photograph displays proved to be popular. People obviously liked to group around them and chat with each other in an informal way. Although it was too early to draw conclusions from the response on the first programme it was at least possible to make some observations:

- News programmes have to be introduced properly to the audience.
- Street replays prove to be rather difficult in catching the attention of the by-passers.
- Photographic street exhibitions work well.

News Programme Two

For the production of the second programme the working conditions within the team had improved considerably. Everybody had a clearer picture of how a programme could be put together and shown in the locality. There were some changes in its format. A newscaster now introduced each item, in order to create a more personal atmosphere. Chris, one of the trainees, managed the new job of presenter remarkably well. Also the introductory

song was rearranged; this time with a faster rhythm and more percussion instruments in the background. The content of the tape was again decided collectively after the members of the team had talked with local people to find out the newest issues.

The programme was to concentrate on the problems of the cuts. Out of six items four were directly about local struggles to fight the price rises of meals in the pensioners' luncheon club, the sacking of a playleader, the effects of the cuts on the Blind Club, and the redundancy of the two workers of the playbus. The first news programme had only given a general view of the cuts but this time more detailed accounts were intended to document the actual effects on the neighbourhood. The two other items covered the opening of a new mums and toddlers' club in Kensal's biggest tower block — Trellick Tower — and a social event on the local playground — the shearing of Bambi, the sheep. (Detailed content of news programme Two see appendix 6).

This time the response to the programme improved. At the pensioners club at the Health Centre an audience of around 50 people attentively watched the news item on the local campaign against price increases at the Luncheon Club. Spontaneous comments were shouted, and the end of the programme was marked by applause. After the showing people wanted to know more about the Kensington Pensioners Action Association and someone suggested that those who had not yet signed the petition should do so. We promised to bring a petition around and to ask Emmy Whitly to give a talk on the pensioners movement. But the pensioners were not only interested in «their bit». At the Luncheon Club, where they were given the choice of seeing the programme in its entirety or only the price-increase item, they were keen to see all of it. Afterwards in the discussion they welcomed the idea of seeing what other groups were doing in the area. This was also true for the mums and toddlers Club where the mothers were most interested in local news.

The street replays reinforced the experience of the first news programme. People were interested in the photo displays, which this time showed the different places and people in the area who had been affected by the cuts. The photographs were complemented with graphics visualising the reduction in expenditure. Again the video newstape was only seen by a few people; it was now clear that the format was not going to work on the streets. After the second production it was possible to draw some more conclusions:

- News programmes – in that format – should be addressed at closed audiences rather than at a wandering street audience.
- For street replays to work properly, another form of presentation has to be found. On the street news ought to be kept short and catchy, with lots of music, and the presenter talking more directly to the audience. Lengthy interviews should be avoided.
- The street exhibitions showed that there is much scope for photographic displays. In conjunction with petition stalls they work excellently as a focus for informal discussion.

News programmes Three and Four

The two remaining news programmes worked on similar lines to the previous ones and confirmed the findings so far. News programme Three was entirely focusing on the local Jubilee craze culminating in three days of street parties in early June, 1977. The team videotaped the festivities and took snapshots. Instead of touring the programme in the community, it was decided to launch a similar exhibition to the Open Day event at the beginning of the project. Two weeks after the street parties the jubilee exhibition at the Church Hall was ready. Again more than a hundred people came to see the tapes and photographs, and there was some interest for the previous news programme as well. In one corner of the hall the Jubilee newstape was shown and in another News programmes One and Two. In addition to that, children could see a selection of cartoons, which had been taken off-air. The central part of the hall was occupied by the photo exhibition. People could order prints of pictures and by the end of the one-day exhibition there were enough orders to keep the darkroom busy for three weeks.

There was also a small exhibition of brass rubbings and paintings, which had been produced and displayed by a local arts workshop for children. The Kensal Community Association put up a booth with information leaflets about their activities and their plans for a new community centre. This time there was a good mixture of different generations. Many families came, and it proved to be a good idea to turn the church hall into a temporary community arts centre, placing the news programme in a broader context of various activities.

News programme Four again toured the neighbourhood. In this last programme the News at West 10 team was able to include some encouraging information. The subsidy to the Blind Club had been saved, the increases at

the Luncheon Club only went up marginally, and the Murchison Road tenants succeeded in getting a substantial rent rebate. The only «lost struggle» to be mentioned was the closure of the nursery at Isaac Newton School. The news programme also included a report on the progress made by the Meanwhile Gardens job creation project, on a tandem bike ride organised by the staff of the adventure playground for fund-raising, and on the rejuvenation of Portobello Dock as a leisure centre including arts and crafts facilities, a pub, and the use of canal boats for pleasure trips.

This time the tape was only shown at the usual replay points and not on the streets. The response in terms of applause and discussions was good, although it was still difficult to say what exactly the different audiences got out of their viewing experience.

Spin-off projects from the News Service

Important by-products of the six-month News at West 10 experiment were the video tapes initiated as spin-off projects from the News Service. It often seemed valuable to follow up a particular issue of the News Service in greater depth.

A good example of this was the group's involvement with the Save-the-Playbus-campaign — organised by the Kensington and Chelsea Play Association. A ten minute information tape about the reasons behind the campaign was produced for showing in the bus at Fleet Street. There the Play Association handed out press releases inviting journalists to come to see the playbus and have a look at the video information tape. Unfortunately, that day Fleet Street was busy handling a newspaper crisis — the possible loss of 2000 jobs — and only a few people came down to the parked playbus. But the direct action was repeated some days later and, as a result, the issue of cuts in play facilities received good news coverage in some of the daily newspapers. The playbus was eventually saved, but only because its two workers managed to get a job creation project.

Another project to evolve out of the News Service was a documentary tape about the lives of six pensioners. This is how I recalled the project in my field notes:

Our regular contact with members of the two local pensioners clubs and our insight into the pensioners' problems of living in an area of high rise blocks, made us think about how old people in Kensal must view their past and how they compare it with modern life. We started to interview four women and three men about the different stages in their lives, and at the end

had collected 5 hours of recordings. These interviews were sectioned up under nine headings: Growing up, Starting work, Hard times, Food and drink, Entertainment, Women at work, Hop picking, Charity and Church, and Local politics. The 20 minute tape was shown on the pensioners day of a festival marking the end of our project. The response was surprising. More pensioners wanted to talk about how they had experienced their lives and agreed or disagreed with what their friends had said on the tape. We had not expected such an eagerness for expression, and the replay convinced us that there was scope for making such documentary tapes to trigger off more basic discussions about present living conditions.

«News programmes are good for discussing the most urgent problems, but in-depth documentaries function better to mobilise the hidden feelings of an audience. Such simple documentaries as the *Old Kensal tape* could also be made in co-operation with immigrant groups, teenagers, young families, and other sections of the community for raising group consciousness or for showing in schools or to other community groups.»

Involvement with children was another area of News at West 10's daily work. Outings were videotaped and replayed at the adventure playgrounds. In the summer holidays a two-week video workshop was organised where children made their own tape about a bank robbery. The team also covered several football games. An edited tape of the Easter match between two local teams was replayed at a pub. These requests helped to establish good relationships with the community in the same way that the Jubilee news tape had created goodwill towards the News at West 10 project.

A local media festival

At the end of August a final one-week exhibition was launched in the church hall, including a presentation of all videotapes and photographs shot during the project. A list of video tapes was available which were shown whenever requested. One of the smaller rooms had been turned into a temporary cinema and each day films were projected for children and for a growing teenage audience. The hired films included Robin Hood, Salt of the Earth, The Wild One with Marlon Brando, The Night for the Living Dead, and off-air cartoons for the under-twelves.

On Monday the press, arts bodies, film-, photo-, and videoworkers were invited. In the late afternoon the exhibition was opened to the local public. Tuesday was Women's Day with a discussion on battered women, on nursery provision for under-fives, and about a videotape on supplementary benefits. On the Pensioners' Day on Thursday the pensioners heating cam-

paign tape was shown and Emmy Whitly gave a talk on the pensioners movement. After tea the Old Kensal tape was premiered and the afternoon ended with a knees-up. On Friday a Kids Outdoor Day had to be cancelled because of bad weather, but entertainment tapes were shown instead. The exhibition closed on Saturday evening with a social event.

Evaluation

Group discussions about the development of the News Service began after the second news programme was finished, and stretched over several meetings until the end of the project. They were all audio-recorded, transcribed, and fed back into the group in order to stimulate the evaluation process.

1. Internal work structure

Much time and effort was spent on sorting out the working relationships within «News at West 10».

Ken: «There we were with a fairly sophisticated concept of a media experiment trying to integrate a number of new adults and four young trainees into this scheme, which we had to invent in order to survive. That certainly led to the most central contradiction of the project: whether we should spend most of our time looking at it as a media experiment or as a youth project. I think that we never resolved that contradiction.»

The «News at West 10» team tried to exert a non-authoritarian collective work style. The trainees came with traditional job expectations, but were asked to participate at the weekly meetings where the work load was discussed and distributed among group members. The trainees were often bored by these meetings or found them too demanding to cope with.

Ken: «It would have been easier with a more rigid structure to start with, so they knew where the boundaries were. It was a very confusing situation for them; like hitting a moving punch bag. Every time they tried to hit us as the authority figures we said we are not the boss. It must have been terribly mystifying for them.»

The trainees also had difficulties with the changing work pace. Sometimes the team would be working till late at night or over the weekend. This asked for more than a 10-6 commitment. They also did not share the same ideological aims and objectives of working in a community media cooperative. They came mainly just to get some job experience.

Andy: «But we couldn't sacrifice the possibilities of what the young people could get out of that project to our media experiment. My emotional drive

was to see that the kids didn't suffer from the project and got something out of it. We spent a lot of time forming close relationships with the trainees which ran counter to running an efficient media experiment. At the end it was a great learning experience for everyone here; the trainees benefited from the project quite considerably. Not necessarily in acquiring what we originally thought would be media skills, but acquiring confidence, a new vocabulary, and coming into contact with a number of new people and a new set of perspectives on life and on themselves.»

Another problem area was the working relationship between the photo- and the video group. The concept of the News Service had mostly been developed by the video group and was then adopted by the two photographers.

The fundamental contradiction of the whole project sprang from the insufficient definition of the different roles involved: the role of job creation, the role of the News Service, and the particular roles of the well-knitted and experienced video group and the younger photo group still looking for direction. This overlapping of roles put much pressure on the News Service experiment, with the result that of the project's total energy only about one third could be actually spent on the development and testing out of news programmes. This has to be borne in mind when assessing the outcome of the six month experiment.

2. What did the news programmes achieve?

The news programmes 1, 2, and 4 oscillated between two main themes reflecting the then present social climate in North Kensington: the cutting of already established services in the areas of play and old age, and the creation of new services, like the drop-in club in Trellick Tower or the local job creation project «Meanwhile Gardens». The News Service succeeded in capturing those trends accurately by first giving a broad picture of the cuts in the Borough's budget (newsprogramme 1), then presenting the different cuts in more detail (newsprogramme 2), and in the fourth programme reporting on the success and failure of the different attempts to halt the cuts. The reports on the freshly established services balanced out the more gloomy stories on the cuts, thus bringing an optimistic «we can do it» atmosphere into the programmes. The mixture of good and bad news was even enforced by including news items with entertainment value like sheep-shearing, or reports on local football, a tandem bike ride or a kids outing. This aspect of the news programmes was strongly criticised in the internal discussions. It was thought that balancing serious items with fun items was

devaluing the issues to mere news stories and therefore copying the neutralising role of television news. But the most questioned aspect of the series was the regular inclusion of local advertisements. It seemed that more effective means than video could be found to advertise local services. A simple news sheet could probably do the same job better and cheaper. A video news service should exploit the advantages of the medium such as life presentation of people through interviews and discussions.

What impact did the news programmes have on the neighbourhood?

Ken: «Our overall expectation of the News Service of raising some of the local issues worked. But in terms of raising people's consciousness to do something about those issues, stimulate them to organise action, I don't think we did do a lot».

Andy: «Only in a limited way, say with the pensioners signing a petition, or the blind club getting their money.»

Ken: «Yes, but in terms of more concerted action we didn't. It was a successful experience in terms of people relating to us being there, seeing «News at West 10» as a positive thing in their area. But the real success, which you can measure by the amount of people dropping in and supplying you with ideas and suggestions, didn't come. We didn't get much feedback about the programmes or demands to include specific issues. So the project didn't become a focal point in the area which we hoped it would.»

How well were the replays organised?

Ken: «We were very bad at replaying the news programmes, partly because we knackered ourselves totally in getting them together, and then had very little energy and drive left to get them properly shown. That was another job where you had to drag the trainees along. But a lot of it was also down to a lack of confidence in our own productions; a lack of confidence that people would actually find them interesting; which was reinforced by the lack of feedback we got for the programmes we did. I mean we only tried one pub after the first programme — got a refusal and decided that pubs weren't on. We never once went to a doctor's surgery or set up at the entrance of Trellick Tower. I think we needed to put more into the replays to get that feedback. We had the pensioners at the Health Centre, which was like the «mecca», because we knew they would be sympathetic. But otherwise there were not many replay points.»

3. Follow up work

Another point raised in the discussions was the question of follow up work. In two cases — the playbus tape and the Old Kensal tape — interesting spin-off projects had evolved from the News Service. There would have been many more opportunities for the team to follow up a particular news item more systematically. In the case of the new drop-in club in Trellick Tower it would have been valuable to have made a short tape on similar nursery and meeting provisions in the Borough and to have shown it back in Trellick Tower as a stimulus. The same applied to the childminders and Meanwhile Gardens, where outside information could have helped the groups objectify their own positions and created new ideas. But it is a time-consuming process for a video group to handle all the spin-off projects themselves. In this respect a local video support group could have fulfilled a useful function.

4. Local support group

At the beginning of the project, the «News at West 10»-team had proposed the idea of an editorial support group consisting of local people who would discuss the progress of the project at open forum sessions.

This support group did not come off the ground. Some of the previous contacts had left the area, and the Kensal Community Association was absorbed in their plans for a new centre. But even if there had been local interest in the actual shaping of the News Service, it would have required more active involvement from the News at West 10 team as well. Too often the team was caught up in their internal problems, and valuable time which could have been spent on liaising with the community was lost. Although a support group did not materialise, the idea is still worth pursuing.

5. The cultural impact of the News Service

Although the News Service operated for only six months, it contributed a valuable cultural stimulus to the Kensal and Murchison area. Three exhibitions in the church hall attracted more than 100 visitors each, and the news programmes were welcomed as a means of breaking up the routine at social meetings. It was proven beyond doubt that there is scope for cross-fertilisation between groups through information exchange, and that it is possible to use news programmes as a discussion starter rather than as a product for passive consumption.

Andy: «But the strongest point that came out of the many letters of support, which we received at the end of the first six months for our application

for an extension, was the effect of us being in the area and organising some cultural events. Much more than the actual news programmes. The fact that we put life into an old church hall that had been derelict for years. The actual exhibitions and the community festival were the strong points of the project. If anyone's interested in running a News Service like ours, it's worth bearing in mind how important the things are which you organise around the news programmes as well.

«It is a shame that the hall wasn't more set up, that it wasn't a more pleasant place to drop in, with ongoing photo exhibitions, with regular training sessions for local people. We are working towards that now, so that our place becomes an environment that people can drop in.

«The other positive thing is that we did begin to make contact with quite a lot of people in the community around here; with the playground, with a new tenants association down the road, with the Health Centre, with a lot of pensioners. We went through a process of establishing credibility. It was a valuable experience in the sense that many people turned up at our exhibitions, were interviewed on the street and in their front rooms and had a good time doing it. This was positive and I think we will reap the benefit of that when we have finally got this place built up. So I don't think we should undervalue those aspects of «News at West 10».

6. Some lessons learned

Andy: «Because we needed to survive we didn't think about the full implications of a News Service. If we'd been funded as an open resource and not as a job creation scheme we wouldn't have done it the way we did. We would have done a test run before going right onto a well programmed project we weren't geared to do. Because things don't develop healthily like that.

«As it was, with the need to supply the Manpower Services Commission with a well defined scheme, we adopted some of the ideas we had about the News Service, applied them to an area where we had done some work before and artificially in a sense, brought a scheme out of the sky and imposed it upon an area and upon our existing work. That brought us a set of real problems.»

Ken: «I think it was a slightly abortive experiment because of the mass of contradictions — the training scheme being the most obvious one. It never really enabled us to explore the News Service concept properly. To evaluate it is like trying to evaluate something that never really had a proper chance. I'm not trying to lump all of the blame for that on the contradictions that the

trainees brought to the project. I also feel that it was due to our own lack of setting an overall structure, and our own lack of experience in getting the programmes together and getting them replayed effectively.»

Fonce: «Neither, again because of the pressures, did we sit down after a programme and really look at it, work out what was good and bad about it and have some ongoing analysis.

«It seems almost impossible not to paint «News at West 10» as a bad experience. It wasn't a great experiment in allowing us to explore the further use of video. But it taught us a lot more about the sorts of mistakes not to make, about the areas to avoid next time round. Definitely we wouldn't try an experiment like that when the people on the project are new to each other, so that you are having a learning situation on every level. Then, the chances are that you're not going to get anywhere at all.»

A new beginning

After the job creation project the «News at West 10» team managed to get a six month extension starting in November 1977. It was planned to continue the News Service within an enlarged catchment area including the whole of North Kensington. But the project developed differently. The demolition of the CAC building at 45 Kensington Park Road made it necessary to find a new permanent base for housing the photo and the video group. Luckily they received a two year lease on one half of St. Thomas Church Hall where they had already been during the first six month of the «News at West 10» experiment. They decided to use the Job Creation extension mainly to do building work and turn the derelict rooms into a video studio, a meeting space, and a darkroom. Therefore only a reduced number of video projects got off the ground.

The trainees made a tape about the different job creation projects in North Kensington and showed it as a discussion starter at an area meeting. Ken produced another regional campaign tape on the raid and occupation of Hounslow Hospital, and the video group replayed it successfully at a large cuts-conference in February 1978. Another product tape tells the story of the *Colville Nursery* in North Kensington, which is known for its pioneering approach. It was planned to tour the tape all over London to demonstrate the successful running of such a nursery and to show the main problems involved.

The extension also helped sort out the future careers of the four trainees. Brendan went for a job on a fishing boat, Maggie wants to study photogra-

phy at college, Anne plans to do a secretarial course, and Chris has been accepted for a training course in adventure playground work.

For the video group, the second six months were a welcome opportunity to recover from the straining activities of the «News at West 10» experiment, and to reflect on the development of the video resource over the past three years.

Where do you stand now after three years of struggling?

Ken: «We've got an adequate space for the first time ever. When we finally open this place on September 16, we will be able to accelerate the pace of work we are doing. We can cater better for workshops, do studio work, and have more space for editing. The rest of the building can be used for meetings and film shows. We also now have sufficient equipment allowing us to produce on a reasonably high quality level. At the moment we are also working out a new organisational structure. We finally got rid of our CAC status and are now going to be a cooperative. We have already changed our name to «West London Media Workshop». In terms of finance the future looks a bit brighter as well. We've come out of the tunnel where the grant-giving bodies just did not want to know us because of our links with the CAC mess. Getting the Job Creation Project started to open other doors to us. We immediately got some money from the local Council, some from Kensington and Chelsea Arts Association, and some more from GLAA (Greater London Arts Association). And it also looks as if we might be getting grants from two other foundations. We are established now and are managing to work in quite an original way.»

Andy: «If we do get this funding we will have some kind of financial security, and it will not be such a struggle for survival any more. We will be able to choose our priorities a lot more. We need the kind of financial commitment from the grant-giving bodies that says, yes, we understand what you're doing, here is enough money to keep you going for three years.»

How do you see the role of institutions handing out grants for experimental projects?

Ken: «Really what should happen is that people should be able to control the means of communication themselves, without having to depend on grant-giving bodies. Community controlled communications networks. Okay, that's the long-term objective. In the short term, it would help if grant-giving bodies would become a bit more supportive than just doling out money. I suppose it could help if they came down a bit more, so that they might be able to understand that everything doesn't fit into slots.

They might see a lot more of our process tapes that aren't neatly packaged.»

Andy: «We are in an exposed position, in an experimental position most of the time. We are full of anxieties. Instead of piling more anxieties on us, which they seem to do, they could share our commitment towards the general direction in which we are going. Then there could be mutual discovery between the two, a mutual learning and a mutual support process.»

How do you see yourself continuing as an open resource?

Fonce: «There is more and more demand coming in. We hope that a lot of the work we have been doing, like recording community festivals or the outing of an adventure playground, or doing something on a block of flats, can now actually be done by play-leaders, community workers, or people themselves. We have now enough equipment to be able to lend out and train these people to do that. More training and access will relieve some of the pressures on us workers here, so that we can go out and do projects on a more developed level as well.»

Ken: «The problems of the future will be getting a good balance between training, access, and initiation of specific projects. We are now sufficiently set up for the first time to get the balance right. That's why going on is quite exciting because we now can set ourselves a number of aims and directions for the year and when we look back we can say how far we have gone and how we have developed. On the basis of our present experience we will be more selective between projects, and we can also give better advice to people who come in and want to use the equipment. But I generally feel that we need to build more evaluation into our work.»

Andy: «I agree. I don't think that we were early enough aware of research. I don't think that we were enough aware of what Heinz was doing. We should have contributed more to that research process. The role of the researcher is to coordinate the group's own research into their work and to assist them with what skills he has. In the same way as we see us video workers assisting people in getting their own tapes together.»

How does working on the fringes influence your personal life?

Andy: «It takes its toll. It's been very hard with the sorts of struggles we have had and the inadequate funding to get any kind of balance at all. Sometimes we work like hell, when everything gets sacrificed from personal friendship to my relationship to Sue and my kids. At other times we are not doing much; and so it is a bit hard for other people to live with me.»

Ken: «Breaking down roles and having a collective approach means that we are kept busy all the time — doing the typing as well as doing an interview, talking about the structure as much as sweeping the floor. That takes its toll as well, but it is an incredibly rewarding situation in which to work.

«Because of the nature of the project there has been little routine work. That can be very hard because all the time you have got the responsibility to initiate. It's up to you what you do, so if you are feeling particularly bad or down there is no way that you can just go by. You have to be fairly fit. Sometimes I just long for a regular job, like driving a van or working in a factory, where you can just sit back and let the structure of the day carry you along. Here it is just not possible.»

Fonce: «I suppose that right from the beginning there was a kind of lag between me and people I'm working with. That also had its advantage. My openness and receptiveness to what has been going on has allowed me, perhaps better than others, to get through the struggling times without getting bugged down by too many worries. Looking back we shouldn't forget that the trial and error and the whole scene about failures and successes was easily outweighed by the freshness of it all. What kept us going a lot of the time were the good experiences we had, the excitement of the Wheatstone Road tape where you saw video being used as an effective tool, the excitement of people seeing themselves back on TV.»

What skills does someone who wants to get involved in community video need to acquire?

Ken: «Obviously a background in community work would be really useful.»

Andy: «Then you need sensibility, an ability to work with people, to enable them to get things together themselves without you playing a leading role.»

Fonce: «I think you need a sense of humour.»

Ken: «The particular video skills aren't that important. For example, it's understanding of people in interview situations that counts, an ability to stimulate them to say what they want to.»

Andy: «People who want to get into this field should go where there are community video groups and possibly try to work with them for a while. Or if someone wants to become a community video worker and already lives in a community, he or she should try and get some equipment together.»

What do you think is so special about community video?

Andy: «As far as I'm concerned, diversification is the very essence of community video. The fact that video can go off in so many directions. That's how it should be. To be able to go off in all these directions of work is what for me is different from film; and that's why video has got a lot more future than film. Because it has this incredible mobility of application.»

Summary of our development and work 1978 – 1980

(By the video workers of the West London Media Workshop)

Four months after the end of the Job Creation project we held an Open Day to celebrate the completion of the renovation work on our building. We now had a studio space for production work, and training courses, and a video editing cubicle and office space.

Since then our work has developed in the following ways:

Training courses

We run regular training courses in the use of video which are geared to enabling people to become competent users of the video portapack. The courses are spread over a month, incorporating 6 x 3 hour lessons, at the end of which the students complete a short project. The courses have attracted people who came from the community and youth work fields. In the future we are planning to run up to six such courses a year.

Access

Partly as a result of the training courses, the demand for access has increased. The form this takes is the loan/hire of the resource's equipment, with a minimum technical/artistic back up from the workers.

Due to the strain this work puts on the equipment the access policy is constantly under review. The greatest demand comes from people working with kids – to assist this we have participated in the creation of a local video consortium, who are currently applying for their own equipment.

Production

This takes three different forms:

Where we assist in either recording or editing a particular tape.

OLOAAD:

A tape of the first Black Women Conference held in London in 1979; recorded on our equipment and edited with us at the workshop.

Task Force Pensioners Festival:

A tape which shows the preparation and organisation of an all London Pensioners Festival in the summer of 1979.

The Save Willesden Hospital Campaign:

A campaign tape on the closure of a local hospital made by a member of the Brent Community Health Council.

Hammersmith children clubs:

A tape made by a playworker to stimulate discussion between parents and staff.

Where we undertake the recording, editing, and production of a particular tape, which is commissioned by a particular group or organisation.

Centrepont:

A tape that looks at the problems of homeless young people in central London — through their own eyes — and at the efforts being made by one particular agency — Centrepont — to offer both short and long term help to kids in crisis situations.

UJIMA:

A tape which looks at the role and work of UJIMA — a Black Housing Association attempting to deal with the problems of young black homeless people.

Where we work with a group or organisation on an issue of mutual interest.

«They've got nothing better to do have they»:

A tape made by the London Women's Playworkers Group which looks at the discrimination faced by girls on male-orientated playgrounds.

«Spelling mistakes»

A studio production of a play put together by unemployed teachers about the failure of the existing education system to meet the needs of young working class people.

Get to the Point:

A tape which uses recordings made at an anti-nuclear festival to look at some of the issues around nuclear power.

Distribution

Together with a number of other video groups around London, we have produced a *Directory of Video Tapes* which has been distributed widely in the educational, community and social work fields.

This has considerably increased the replaying of our tapes outside of the immediate locality, and distribution is playing a bigger part in our work.

The existence of a distribution network means also that tapes can be made about issues and situations of general interest and be assured of a wider audience.

Appendix

- 1) The local Council eventually came to recognise the CAC as the main organisation representing local interests and agreed to the conversion of the building. The Council also came up with a grant for the CAC to employ three part-time coordinators over a period of several months to stimulate community activities while the Tabernacle was still in process of conversion. In the meantime the CAC also got itself a short-life property from the Notting Hill Housing Trust, the rent being provided by the British Council of Churches. The CAC intended to use this three storey building at 45 Kensington Park Road as a temporary base for the development of its activities. The Notting Hill community press moved into the basement, a group of photographers installed a darkroom, and there were a number of meeting rooms to be used by any community group that wished to do so.
- 2) The Greater London Arts Association (GLAA) came forward with £750, which was to cover the wages for a coordinator, running costs and tapes. Out of a £655 grant from the City and Parochial Foundation an editing deck was bought. And £117 from the Kensington and Chelsea Arts Association was just enough to acquire a camera adaptor and an audio mixer. Finally, the Sony Rover portapack plus monitor came from the British Film Institute on loan, and the Goldsmith College AV/TV department was generous enough to allow the use of their portapacks, monitors, and microphones whenever urgently needed.
- 3) *Colville Square*. A short 15 minute tape was made of the people living around the square, cleaning it up, and ripping up the fence of a private landlord. It was a spontaneous event and was recorded because the equipment was there, and really everybody (30-40 adults and children) enjoyed watching it in the square the same evening.

Carnival. Some recordings were made of the local People's Carnival run by the Community Action Centre. What was recorded has been replayed in Powis Square and to lots of individuals who came to see it at the CAC building at 45 Kensington Park Road.

The Drop-In Club Party. In response to a request from the Housing Action Centre, the equipment was taken along to an end-of-project party for the homeless families involved. They recorded their party and replayed the tape there and then. It was replayed again in November when the families came together to plan a project for the Christmas holidays.

- 4) Powis Square was a privately owned garden square in the centre of the Colville area. It had been locked up for years and the weeds were over three foot high. As early as 1961 the Colville and Powis Square Residents Association had called for Powis Square to be opened to the public. In response the owner had offered its use for rent of £500 a year which the Association set about raising. However, the owner promptly raised the rent to £2,000 a year and the Association gave up.»

In 1967 the People's Centre decided to put pressure on the Council to buy the square. There was a petition organised, the picketing of the owner's house, and a symbolic play-in. But no success.

«By the time the 1968 play programme was in progress Powis Square was the focus of the People's Centre's activity again. At a public meeting called by the centre in May, the idea of more direct action on Powis Square was put forward. A new group had come into the Centre, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, and they were convinced that all conventional channels had been tried by the Centre and that more direct action was needed. So while other members of the Centre picketed and lobbied the Council over the buying of Powis Square, the VSC spent the week advertising what they called «a free party in Powis Square» on Saturday, May 25th. That same morning a child was hurt in a road accident in Colville Gardens, a vigil was organised in the street and the bells of All Saints Church tolled to mark the accident. The vigil turned into an angry march of children and adults circling around the closed garden squares. It was as this was going on that the VSC came on the scene and marched on the square supported by a pantomime donkey and a gorilla: As they advanced they were met by a large body of police, angry scuffles followed and eight arrests were made. The party was not held in the square but tragic emphasis was added to the whole day's events when another

child was knocked down two days later. A week later 600 mothers and children marched from North Kensington to the Town Hall chanting *Open the Squares.*»

«Then on Saturday, June 15th, the VSC came back for another attack. They held a public meeting outside the locked gates, and called on all residents to join with them in opening the square for the people. Then they moved forwards, past the immobile policemen, and forcibly pulled down the fences which surrounded the square. In a few minutes the square was filled with jubilant demonstrators and children, though many parents held back more hesitantly. During the next few days the square was filled with people at all times of day and night. Opponents of the opening exercised their dogs. The People's Association issued a statement disassociating themselves from the methods used by the VSC without the active support and involvement of local residents. However, at the next meeting of the People's Centre, the Powis Square Committee was set up to concentrate on working out the best way in which the square should be laid out and used, and to continue to pressure the Council to buy. This committee organised the clearing up of rubbish on the square and started organising painting and games for the children.»

«Then barely three weeks after the fences were torn down, on July 9th the Council announced that, *agreement had been reached with the owners. Preparations are in hand to convert the square into a playspace for children.* At a victory celebration in the square bunting fluttered above a large banner proclaiming: *At last the square belongs to the people. The Council have learned a simple lesson from the local people and children. The Council is the servant of the Community.*

«However this was in many ways just the beginning of a long struggle to force the Council to provide enough money for the square to be properly resourced with playleaders, equipment and proper maintenance — a struggle which was still going on into 1974.» (Jan O'Malley, *The Politics of Community Action*, p. 83).

5) News Programme Two:

● News at West 10 — song

The presenter introduces the programme.

● *Blind Club*

Portrait of Mrs. Murphy, a partially sighted pensioner who had been going to the Blind Club every week for three years. She tells how the £240 from the Council used to be spent on an outing to the seaside,

for a Christmas party, and on subsidising tea and biscuits. The report tried to show the inhuman aspects of the cuts.

● *Increases in the Council's Luncheon Club*

The meals had already been raised from 16p to 25p, and in October were finally to go up to the proposed 40p. Although Kensington and Chelsea is one of the richest Boroughs in London, their prices were dearest. The Kensington Pensioners' Action Association, with members from all parts of North Kensington — the poverty pocket of the Royal Borough — had organised a petition in protest against the proposed increases. In an interview, Emmy Whitley, the chairwoman of the association, explained why the petition had been organised: «We feel that October is the time when the pensioners start having to pay extra for their heating. This will make them think twice about going to the Luncheon Club for a meal. The cut is too drastic. The Council must have surplus money somewhere. After all the meal is not supposed to be paid for, it is a social service. The reaction of most pensioners is that it is not just one increase of 40p, but it must be seen in terms of everything else going up as well.»

● *Adventure Playground*

A report on sheepshearing at Horniman's Adventure playground.

● *Drop-In Club in Trellick Tower*

Mothers and children in Trellick Tower have very few places to meet. There was a need for mothers to have somewhere locally to take their children, and to meet together as a group. The ideal solution, as the mothers in Trellick Tower found out, was to have space within the block itself. To show the Greater London Council that there was support for this need, the mothers organised a petition in Kensal. Through their efforts they acquired a one-bedroom flat on the first floor of Trellick Tower. The report on the opening of the new club consisted of interviews with some of the mothers about their reasons for coming with their babies. Another interview was conducted with two social workers who talked about the possible further development of the new club.

● *Advertisement*

Jumble sale at the Health Centre in aid of the Over-50s Club.

● *Advertisement*

Jumble needed for a bazaar organised by the Health Centre's Mothers and Toddlers Club.

● *Advertisement*

Arts and crafts classes on Thursdays.

- *Advertisement*

Volunteers needed to work on adult literacy scheme.

- *The sacking of Francis Prudeau*

The adventure playgrounds in Kensington and Chelsea had been savagely affected by the cuts with a total of nine redundancies. On Monday, April 18th, the Management Committee of the Notting Hill Adventure Playground had to leave the playground under police protection. After a one-day strike and protest the Committee refused to reinstate Francis Prudeau, a playleader who had been with the playground for eight years and whom they had made redundant in March. The refusal angered a crowd of parents, children and fellow playground workers. The «News at West 10» team covered the event and reported on the plans for further action.

- *Cutting the playbus*

Two of the nine redundancies were the workers on the playbus, which nine months before had been purchased by the departing Lady Mayoress, Mrs. Jocelyn Sundin-Smith out of her mayoral fund. The playbus took kids to the seaside and on other outings, was used by the playgrounds for their summer camp and by other groups as a mobile nursery and play facility. The report uncovered the hypocrisy behind the cuts by quoting some of the euphoric publicity nine months before when the Mayoress said in a press statement: *I wanted to give the playbus to break the cycle of deprivation that has occurred to so many children in the Borough.*

- The news programme finished with a short report on the Easter charity football match and further announcements on the jubilee preparations.

List of research material

CAC video report by Andy Porter, Alfonso Santana, and Ken Lynam. Notting Hill 1976.

A preliminary report on «News at West 10» by Heinz Nigg. Notting Hill 1977.

Grant applications of the CAC video group.

Field notes kept by the researcher in form of a diary. February 1977 — August 1977.

Transcripts of audio-recorded group meetings.

Transcripts of news programmes and other video tapes.

Transcripts of interviews with members of the video group.

One particularly important book for background reading: Jan O'Malley.

The Politics of Community Action. Nottingham 1977.

CHANNEL 40

Local cable television station in Milton Keynes

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Introduction

Channel 40 was the sixth cable television experiment to be launched in the UK. It began transmitting its signals through the cable network of Milton Keynes, a new city in Buckinghamshire, some 50 miles north of London, in December 1976. Its most important feature was that it embodied the first local cable television station in the UK to be financed entirely from public money of one sort or another. It still holds that distinction in isolation.

Earlier, in the historical section on cable, the troubled story of how cable developed in this country was sketched. It is important to bear this background in mind to fully appreciate the significance that many people attached to the performance of Channel 40 at the time of its birth. Unfettered by the constraints of private capital, would it prove that the much acclaimed idea of community television through cable worked, or not? As Channel 40 comes up to complete its second full year of service there are those who would argue it has been successful and those who would say it hasn't. The aim of this section is not to come down firmly on one side of the fence, but rather to supply some information on the workings of the station, so at least the reader is in some sort of position to judge for her or himself what the relative strengths and weaknesses of such an undertaking are.

Milton Keynes is a new city only in its sixth year of development. It is not scheduled for completion until well into the 1990s, when its population should approach a quarter of a million. At the moment not many more than 30,000 people have been moved into new city houses, to join an existing 60,000 inhabitants living in the established communities of Bletchley, Stony Stratford and Wolverton. Channel 40 can only reach the new population as the cable networks covers only new housing.

The scheme was brought into being by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) who are the body responsible for seeing the city build itself up. They are financing the running costs of the television experiment which roughly work out at £50,000 for each of three years up to 1979, when the exercise will be reviewed. The cost of equipment, amounting to about another £50,000, is being paid for out of a grant from the Post Office, who are also responsible for the building and running of the cable network.

All of the new city houses owned by the MKDC and rented to tenants have to go onto the cable system. The small proportion of private buyers have the option. The cable service offers the two BBC TV channels, three regional commercial channels, Channel 40, and an FM radio band.

One of the central factors behind the experiment was the wish of the MKDC to improve the communication and information links within the new city community. The major problems faced by new families, many of whom have moved to Milton Keynes from poor housing in inner cities, are usually isolation and a feeling of strangeness. A local cable television station, with a structure designed to promote access for ordinary people, clearly has potential in this kind of situation.

Another unusual element in the make-up of the new city is that it is planned on a dispersed basis and covers a vast area of about 60 square miles. This means the normal communication problems are exacerbated by large geographical distances.

One advantage Channel 40 did begin with was the fact that it started in the relatively early stages of the new city's growth. So, in a very important sense, it has been growing up alongside the community it was designed to serve. Although the project's director sees disadvantages in this as there are no well established groups in the community to latch on to.

The television station itself is housed in a new city block of rented flats. The two-storey building has had six of its apartments given over to Channel 40 and these have been converted to serve the needs of a small TV unit. They are furnished in a modern style and give the casual visitor an impression of light and openness.

The following sections about Channel 40 are closely based on the views of the people who work there. This is a deliberate choice. It gives the reader an opportunity to assess the project from the inside with the benefit of some hard information as well as personal views. There are some interesting differences in emphasis between the two main sections — one an interview with the project director and the other with one of the station's producers.

One thing is certain: the way in which Channel 40's performance is judged will go a long way in determining the future chances for local cable and community television in this country.

Channel 40 leaflet

Below appear some extracts from a brief leaflet — *Channel 40: community access cable television in Milton Keynes*:

Channel 40 is a unique project — the first time in the UK that an experiment in community use of cable television has been set up on an entirely independent and non-commercial basis. Channel 40 is not connected with the BBC,

with commercial television, or with any organisation in the broadcast or communications industry.

Starting in December 1976 we will be transmitting to all new city homes using the Post Office cable system, a few hours each week of locally produced programmes made by, with and for people living in Milton Keynes.

Community television is very different from broadcast television; the half-dozen programme staff at Channel 40 use simple black and white equipment of the kind found in many schools and colleges. Our task is to help Milton Keynes people to make their own do-it-yourself television.

The purpose of Channel 40 is to provide people living in the new city with:

1. An additional means of access to information about Milton Keynes.
2. Access to a means of expression, to enable individuals and groups in Milton Keynes to share their interests and points of view with others in the new city.

You can make use of Channel 40 in two ways:

As a viewer

You can watch Channel 40 programmes; we can't predict what kinds of programme people will decide to make, but we expect them to include informational programmes about what is going on in the new city, community affairs programmes about matters of local concern and interest, and entertaining programmes including sports events, leisure and recreation activities, music, drama and so on.

As a programme-maker

You can learn to use one of our portable, battery-operated cameras, free of charge, and borrow it to record your own programme material; we'll help you to edit it for transmission.

You can book the Channel 40 mobile recording unit to bring our studio cameras to a football match, a music performance, or a community event.

You can help out in the studio, either facing a camera as a programme presenter, or operating a camera if you're up to it. You can suggest an idea for a programme that you, or we, or some other interested group could make.

All participation in the Channel 40 project is voluntary. No charge is made for the use of the Channel 40 studio or production equipment or for the help of the staff; nor is anyone paid for taking part in the making of programmes in any capacity; nor do the people living in homes which receive their television via the cable system pay any extra charge to receive Channel 40 programmes.

Interview with Michael Barrett, project director, Channel 40

The project director for the Channel 40 cable TV experiment is Michael Barrett who was appointed to the job at the very beginning of the exercise. He studied languages at Cambridge University and worked for several years in advertising, living in Zürich, Madrid and then Montreal. In the late 1960s he attended a conference addressed by Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan, which together with other influences led him away from the commercial field and back to teaching and studying education and communications in Canada. It was during the early 1970s that he discovered video.

To understand the Channel 40 experience from the point of view of the individual who has determined its shape most, there follows the edited transcript of an interview taped with Michael Barrett at Milton Keynes in February, 1978.

During the early 1970s what attracted you to video?

MB: While working with video based in colleges I became aware that the equipment was kept in the separate «Audio-Visual Services» sections or, in one case, the Institute of Educational Technology. They stored it and would lend it out to people in the university who wanted to use it in courses. That idea was very important to me; I realised that if you have a group of technicians who manage equipment, providing production help and resources to people who want to produce, without the technicians themselves playing any role in the content of the communication — then that's an interesting model. If it worked in the culturally intensive and highly political atmosphere of a university community, why shouldn't the same happen at the level of a geographical community? I still have that model in my head. The idea that there is a resource centre which provides facilities.

Were any of your students' projects at this time based in the community?

MB: Yes. At Dawson College there was a strong environmental movement, centred on a motorway development. We used video with the group who objected to it being built, and I found for the first time it worked. We interviewed people and then arranged playbacks mostly in the college. Then, in the summer of 1972, I returned to the UK, having lived abroad for twelve years. I heard about the Swindon Viewpoint cable experiment, which was in a town I'd known since childhood. I contacted the cable company there, Radio Rentals, who put me in touch with the station operators, EMI, and

their manager, Richard Dunn. We saw things in a very similar way and he hired me. I started there in November, 1972, as the station moved into its premises.

In what capacity were you taken on?

MB: The original idea for Viewpoint, as it evolved in Richard Dunn's and a couple of other EMI initiators' minds, was a dual concept. It was that in the same building there could be a studio (mobile, one-inch video tape system), which would be a mini «local TV station», along with an almost separate operation, based on half-inch equipment, which people could borrow to get access. I was hired to set up and run that access facility. In practice we found the two were not only compatible, but even mutually dependent, and the dividing line did not really exist. «Access» meant access to whatever resources were appropriate. But we still maintained the notion of two systems. Richard Dunn produced and edited the main transmission on Sunday, which contained most of the more entertaining and televisual sorts of programmes. I produced and edited the Tuesday transmission which was seen as the community access spot.

Did your ideas about video in the community change with practice?

MB: I don't think so. I still have a very clear idea about the facilitating role which a resource can play for its community. Obviously none of us really knew what we were doing in those early days, nor did we pretend to. I think what changed importantly was the realisation that the enthusiastic euphoria about video of the early 1970s was not really justified when you tried to apply it in a systematic, consistent and continuous way.

Video is a very difficult medium to use and it turned out not to be the case that hundreds of people would immediately rush the doors to get their hands on portapacks or access to the studio. Also I now realise that there is an enormous difference between using video in a small-town provincial situation and using it in a metropolitan city.

What were the lessons you learned over two years at Swindon Viewpoint?

MB: One was the importance of regular programme through-put. That if you made a promise to the community that you would put out so many hours a week, at fixed times, you had to deliver. And that meant softening to some extent the purist concept of access, where you literally sit back and wait for people to come and demand it. You have to go out and in many cases initiate discussions which may or may not lead to programmes. I still believe we should not make «Channel 40» programmes, but I do see it as im-

portant to make contact with people where we know there may be a desire to make a programme.

How did you come to leave Swindon Viewpoint?

MB: I had no intention of leaving at all. Somebody from the Milton Keynes Development Corporation attended a conference and was particularly interested in the research carried out at Viewpoint by Leicester University. The original master plan for Milton Keynes, written in the 1960s, specifically mentioned that efforts should be made to achieve good communication, public awareness and participation in the new development. Subsequently this person visited Swindon and asked me to come to Milton Keynes to explain the experiment more fully — and then I was offered the job.

The Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) already had a contact with the Post Office to install a cable system which they felt could be used for some form of local communication. But they did not at that stage have any clear concept. So they asked me to see if it was possible to set up a similar cable experiment. It wasn't definite whether we could get a licence or raise the money. In 1972, the government had said they would grant up to six licences and only five had been given, so there was hope another was available. The Home Office agreed and then remained getting the money which was raised from the Post Office and the MKDC.

We had a year of preperation from early 1975, and we were supposed to move into this building in April, 1976. In fact, we were a couple of months late in moving into the building and then a couple of months later still in taking delivery of the control room and post-production system. We didn't get all the equipment working until the very end of November and started transmitting at a rather awkward time in mid-December, just before Christmas.

What were your major concerns apart from discussing the nature of the project with the MKDC and the Post Office?

MB: I don't want to sound pretentious about this, but my major concern was on a broader scale than just Milton Keynes, because I felt that there was a national context, and maybe even an international one. We were at a time, in the mid 1970s, when questions were being asked about the media. All sorts of rethinking was going on, both within broadcasting institutions and community self help organisations, about the role of information and communication. The fact that the Milton Keynes project, if it got off the ground, would be financed from public money, as opposed to the private capital of commercial cable operators, was another concern because it would be the first time that this had occurred.

Did you see that as critically important?

MB: No, because I have always believed that the centrally important thing is how people use the equipment to make programmes and, to be honest, I have never felt that the structure of the management board would play a decisive role in the day-to-day programming. I think the evidence shows that this was the case. On the other hand, it was necessary to meet the requirements of the Home Office for a licence (costing £ 1,800 for the first year and then renewable at £ 1,000 per annum) and that meant setting up a legal entity. Another concern was to carry out an «initiating and holding» operation.

I felt we should set something up which would be sufficiently structured to enable it to operate on a continuing basis, but nevertheless be sufficiently open-ended to be adapted, if it were to go into a second experimental phase, to community management or ownership. Then there was the other area of concern of holding a licence «on behalf of» 30,000 people who pay £ 11 a year to be on the cable system. So there has to be some concept of responsibility to them, ensuring we don't blow the money wastefully.

Your own position is one area we haven't talked about.

MB: First of all I was hired in a consultant capacity in which I would not be in any specific MKDC department, but would be answerable to the General Manager for progress on the project. Next, a sort of working party evolved. It was of a very informal kind and consisted of three people, apart from myself as an implementing agent who would look into the business of acquiring equipment and finding a base to operate from.

We needed administrative and legal back-up so an individual from the MKDC helped with that. We also co-opted an individual involved in the original specifying and tendering of the cable contract to provide information on the technical and engineering side of the cable system. Also he had a working relationship with the Post Office. Then we co-opted a kind of «father-figure» who originally became involved because, some years before, he had been a leader in a local movement to fight a central government decision to put an additional London airport in north Bucks.

It stayed as a working party of three or four people, during that initial paper-work phase. We explored a number of possible legal forms and found that we would not be eligible for charitable status. We then looked at various company forms and were at one stage thinking about a company limited by guarantee with no share capital, but then we found that that had some problems; for instance what would happen to all the equipment at the end of the day if we packed up? It would have to be given to somebody. We

found that the easiest, most practical form, was to initiate a straightforward £100 limited company, in which it was intended that those nine people, who were invited to sit on the Board, would each own one share, and the remaining 91 shares would simply stay unissued till the end of the project.

How did you recruit that Board?

MB: It was a long process of trying to take in suggestions from all sides (when I say all sides, I mean anybody one happened to talk to). We tried to compose a Board of nine worthies who would have some genuine interest and concern for the project; hopefully some would live on the cable system themselves, some might be helpful in enabling us to start some of the programming. As an example, one individual runs the largest and newest comprehensive school in the area. To mention some others: the local organiser of the Citizen's Advice Bureau, an Anglican minister, a local parent-teacher association organiser, a youth and community worker employed by the local college of education and a housewife whose husband is a councillor and who herself is active in a number of community organisations.

What about planning the equipment side of the station?

MB: The original idea was that it might be possible to run the whole production system from time-based corrected half-inch video tape. But I couldn't find an appropriate editing system, indeed there still isn't one, two years later; so I had to settle for a combination of either half and one-inch, or half and three-quarter inch equipment. I approached several companies, some largish ones like EMI and PYE, some small ones like Studio 99. I think I even approached Action Video and REW, and then some intermediate ones like Zoom. The only interested ones who pursued it actively were EMI and Zoom. Nobody was very keen to sell to us. EMI did take it seriously because I had had an association with them in Swindon. In the final analysis, they seemed the logical people. They had all the technical design capability and had had the experience of equipping Swindon. So they designed and implemented the system, which was a lengthy process.

Central Milton Keynes

Aerial view of construction site for shopping building; civic offices left centre. Central area housing above.

Photo: Pineham





«Things that mother never told us!»

(A community communication self-help project for women)

The following excerpts were taken from: Hilary B. Thomas. *An Evaluation of a community communication self-help project for women*. Communication Studies and Planning Ltd. Milton Keynes 1979.

Between September 1978 and July 1979, Carolyn Gorney, who had worked for some years in Milton Keynes' community arts- and youth work, has produced 20 TV programmes with young mothers using video and the broadcasting facilities of Channel 40. The object of the project was to try to break down some of the barriers of isolation surrounding women in a new town.

Carry Gorney: «I have been with Inter-Action in Milton Keynes for the last 3 years, working with youngsters. Slowly I began to think: What about the Mums? What does it feel like to move into a New Town and be a stranger to everyone? What is it like to be a woman, alone in a house on a new estate with a new baby or a toddler or a kid just starting school? «Things that mother never told us!» was about things that concern them, to share information.»

A considerable amount of help and advice was given to the women in making the tapes + by Channel 40 and by local professional groups such as House School Link, and local maternity units. But the ideas and topics discussed in the TV programmes – ranging from pregnancy and giving birth to marriage, the family, schooling and friendship – were built primarily on the experiences of the women themselves. Some 150 women were involved directly in the project. The degree of involvement varied among the participants. Some had initiated tapes, brought together groups and acted as «key women» in the project. Other women had taken part as members of groups making tapes or in discussions and had no further participation.

Here is what some of the women felt about their involvement in the project:

Bridget:

It's made me more understanding of other people, realising they've got problems too; you see you're not as much down in the dumps as you thought you were. Being a single parent you've got problems; if you're married you've got problems; if you're widowed – you still have problems, throughout life, you just have to accept and overcome them.





Sue:

What came out of our first tape was mainly conflicts with authority; even going out of our houses, wrangles with the Milton Keynes Development Corporation, with doctors and teachers; and how difficult it is when we're us and they're them.

We then had to go back to Channel 40 and edit it. We had to sit through a good hour of tapes and say «What are the main points of discussion, what themes came out of it? What do we want used and what do we want cut out?» So we worked on that in threes and twos, and learned about logging and editing.

After editing we decided it needed something at the beginning so we learned how to use the cameras and filmed ourselves coming up the street for the beginning, and coming in.

Maureen:

It's different making a film to talking to friends. This, funnily enough, has gone much deeper; it would take maybe three years to say these things to a close friend; and through these films, doing things with women, before you know it you forget the camera is there and all these things come pouring out.

It's a great feeling to express yourself. A lot of the time you keep your mouth shut because of your intellectuals. You feel a little bit inferior. I feel as though I can't express myself properly because I can't say the big words that they say. But when I do this I couldn't care less – everything comes out the way I want it to come out. And I've got myself over and understood – probably a damn sight plainer + and the other women's points have come straight to me, straight from the heart, from them, and in plain English that I can understand. If you picked up a book about these women's problems it'd probably be in terms we wouldn't even understand.

Rose:

I'm really pleased to see that some of the women I've met through the project, are making their voices heard in the area, eg. Jenny, Bridget, Maureen and friends, who protested about oversize school classes, and Sally and Irena who are campaigning about the rising fives. I'm concerned about nursery provision and my experience on the project has taught me + don't sit at home moaning! Other women feel like you, and, as they say, there's a strength in numbers, so get together and do something!



What were the major considerations from your point of view?

MB: It was clear to me that we needed three main components. Firstly, portable equipment which would be primarily for loan to members of the public, but which would also be used by the staff. Secondly, a fixed studio installation associated with a post-production and editing facility, in which the studio cameras would be operable by volunteers, but the control room would be operated by staff. Thirdly, a mobile unit which would take the studio cameras out, perhaps operated by volunteers with one or more staff members switching and so on.

Since we had agonised over the «standards» question and decided on 3/4 inch, it was then fairly straight forward; a matter of finding compatible bits and pieces. If I were to do it over again, I would try to have a more comprehensive post-production facility in a vehicle, and perhaps merely an editing and transmission set-up in a building, in order to dispense with the studio. If you have a relatively high capability studio with good acoustics, there is a temptation to shoot the easy way, by just inviting people into it. We don't use the mobile enough, we don't shoot enough of our major productions outside. When we go outside, nine times out of ten, it is easier to take a portapack, and I don't think the portapack gives adequate coverage of large-scale events.

How did you plan the staff side?

MB: The selection of staff is crucial to the running of the station. In terms of numbers, I felt that I had an adequate model in mind; three or four production people, a technical person and an administrative/secretary person. The production people are the key element as they make the thing work — or not.

Had you decided on six as the number?

MB: No, not definitively — but that was my model. Going back a step, first of all you have to think in terms of what the overall production capability in hours might be. In a sense it doesn't matter how often you transmit the programmes; the problem is how you make and post-produce them. Given we have only one post-production system, that is the crunch. I had hoped, if we could have afforded it, to have had a secondary editing system. I reckoned that if that post-production system was in use most of the time, it could probably process somewhere between three and four hours a week of produced material.

My rule of thumb, looking around all the cable experiments, was that you could probably reckon on each production person coping, on average, with

around an hour a week. In the cases of Bristol and Sheffield, where they increased enormously the number of staff, it didn't increase greatly the effectiveness of the operation; it just produced a whole lot of additional problems. Because of the larger context of the project, I was concerned that as an experiment we should try to operate something that was reproduceable. How many towns could afford 17 or 18 staff? So I felt six staff would be about the right number.

How did you recruit the staff?

MB: We recruited them in a variety of ways. We put some ads in trade papers; I always felt that «grapevine» networks would be the most satisfactory, but in fact recruiting staff is incredibly difficult, and I don't see it clearly even now. I'm still not sure what kinds of people can most easily do this sort of work.

What I was looking for was a commitment to the concept of enabling others to communicate and a conviction that the medium can be used appropriately in that way. I was against the idea of having anybody with professional broadcast television training, because I think that would have carried with it too many preconceptions and a dependence on resources that we simply wouldn't have. On the other hand, I felt it was important that the people should all have some practical and intellectual grasp of media usage, but it didn't necessarily have to be video. I thought if somebody had used a movie camera or had some experience of audio recording, it would be easy to pick up video technology very quickly. In retrospect, I think it really proves to be a great advantage if a person has a practical background of video work. I now think that kind of person is relatively rare.

Is that one of the points that you have changed your view on?

MB: In a way, yes. Because of my own experience, knowing nothing about video, but picking it up fairly quickly, I assumed that anybody else would be able to do the same. I have never been concerned about the technical aspects and I have no technical background; I was more concerned with the use to which it might be put, but I no longer believe that it is that easy to simply pick up a piece of equipment and use it effectively. I think it takes a lot of hard work.

How did you work out your programming?

MB: In Swindon we originally decided on four types of programming, but then came down to three. One was the «local TV station» output. It had sports, entertainment and major features. A second transmission had the bulk of the community access, the grass roots and the half-inch. A third

transmission had things we judged to be of interest to women. We ran that, experimentally for three months on a Wednesday afternoon, and nobody watched it so we packed it in. The fourth was a purely informational programme of mainly «what's on» type items. I never really liked that idea but preferred a programme to be open, so that each transmission would have a bit of everything in it.

Here in Milton Keynes we started with three exactly equal transmissions with the idea that each would have some entertaining piece, maybe an issue of some kind, maybe some information, with the foreknowledge that particular inclinations of each individual producer would shape their transmissions and therefore these would take on specific characteristics.

Towards the end of the first year of transmission we decided we would change our schedule, away from three «assemblages» of programme items transmitted twice each, to two «assemblages» transmitted three times. The reasons were firstly that there did not seem to be as high a rate of programme initiation as expected. Secondly, by decreasing the number of separate transmissions that allowed us more production time.

How would you describe the relationship between Channel 40 and the community?

MB: You can't describe it without talking about Milton Keynes; it is much more difficult to run a station here than in Swindon. Two-thirds of the population live in the existing towns of Bletchley, Stony Stratford, Newport Pagnell, Wolverton and one or two villages. One third of the population, the cable third, have moved here within the last few years, into the new city houses. They are our potential audience. The others are not. This results in a number of problems. It is argued by some that we are yet another divisive element, that people in the new city houses get all the «goodies», but what about the folks in Wolverton? Secondly and more importantly, the physical city has been planned on a dispersed population, low-density basis, with long road distances between houses and shops and facilities. People on the whole have inadequate transportation facilities.

What are the geographical distances?

MB: From the south of Bletchley to the north of Wolverton it is probably eight miles. The new city is in the centre, between those populated areas. But the real problem is that, because the new city population is still at a low level, of about 30,000, it does not warrant, in the eyes of the bus company, a proliferation of bus services. Therefore people are dependent on cars. Most couples and single people living up here either use their cars for work or in

many cases don't have cars; they're dependent on buses. So personal mobility is very difficult because we are in the middle of this dispersed area.

The social and cultural organisations are all embryonic here. They are at the stage of just being set up, so they are preoccupied with primary problems, and there just isn't enough discretionary time available to devote to secondary problems like communications.

How successful have you been in overcoming those problems?

MB: I think that we reached a point, after some nine months of transmission, when we realised that we could not merely be a passive resource centre hoping that people would come here. We know that we have to go out more and contact organisations and groups. Of course one would like to do much more of that, but there are problems of how to do it and finding the time. It is a very difficult question and I don't know how to answer it really.

How are programmes made?

MB: It's now pretty clear that there is a predictable development pattern. It held true in Swindon and it also holds true here. In both cases there were several months running around with video equipment, just showing our faces, without «selling» the project. I always have been opposed to the idea of over-promotion, particularly in Milton Keynes where everything is promoted in glossy brochures and on posters. We did that for a few months and then came to the point where we started transmitting.

In the first few months you have a very high take-up in terms of people wanting to make programmes. But a large proportion of those have not really understood what the project is about and they see themselves as making «TV programmes». They become disillusioned because of the work involved, and the time-consuming characteristics of video. Either they drop out, or they complete one programme and then disappear.

The first three or four months also coincide necessarily with a period of excessive workload for the staff, because they too are still learning how to use the system. Then there is a change around the six month period, where the staff are much better at using the system and enabling others to use it; and there are perhaps fewer people taking up the opportunity because there has been disillusionment at the audience end based on people's expectations that they could have a «local TV station», and now they find out that they have only got «community video on cable». At that period there is a lower take-up, but a much higher productivity. And then you reach, at the end of the first year, a period of settling down and much greater acceptance

at the audience end. Some of them will always say «I never watch that community rubbish» and others will say «It's interesting because local people are doing it themselves and they're not professionals.» And that's when I think the project will have reached a viable point. I think we are just about there now.

Could you categorise the sorts of people that now make programmes?

MB: No. I'm not evading the question, I'm saying «No, I can't do it.» You'd have to look down the lists of 800 programmes transmitted last year. (See programme section in this chapter).

I would like to see more self-organising programme makers and more use by two groups in particular — community workers and teachers. That's looking at it from the production point of view, but looking at it from the viewing end, the research figures are slightly higher than I had expected. I had guessed that we would, after ten months, have maybe a ten per cent «regular every week» audience. Now it shows seventeen per cent.

How much feedback do you actually get from the viewers?

MB: Very little, and that held true as well in Swindon and I think in all the cable experiments. When we started doing our live phone-in programmes last September, we were very encouraged by the first one, which had both our phone lines jammed solid. But the subsequent ones weren't up to that and we would find on a bad day maybe three or four phone calls, on a good day six or eight. Very few letters come in, but on the other hand certain feedback is positive. For instance in the Tuesday programme *Grassroots* Channel 40 T-shirts are given away in a quiz in which you have to identify a still photograph of a part of Milton Keynes and phone in. One evening fifteen people phoned in. On the other hand some evenings none will, so it depends.

Do you think you concentrate too much on local public information type programmes?

MB: I wish we had more of that material. I think that's a very useful function. Maybe it's a perspective particularly relevant to Milton Keynes, where people do need information about opportunities that are available to them.

What does Channel 40 mostly put out?

MB: The things that we have done most of and done best up till now I would hang under the label that happens to be the title of one of our programmes called *Grassroots*. It includes items like folk music, local community

history and new residents discussing their problems. Also it would include useful, practical information as undramatic as how to get involved in youth clubs or old-age pensioners get-togethers and even information about when the health clinic is open.

Are you nothing more than a local newspaper in TV form?

MB: No, I completely disagree with you there. There is a enormous difference between what we think we do and what a local newspaper does. It has to do with the marketing environment in which a newspaper exists; it has to sell advertising space and it has to increase its circulation. Operationally this affects the style and the very process of reporting and editing. Newspaper staffers are a group of people taking on themselves the task of judging what is appropriate to communicate to the rest of us (as opposed to us being able ourselves to communicate what we think is appropriate). The fact is that a lot of the things that most of us know most about, are best able to talk about and enthuse others about, are very banal, ordinary everyday things. That's why I'm convinced that this sort of community television is not about the newsworthy or the special or the unusual, it's about the ordinary and the everyday.

Do you think community media should be associated with radical political positions?

MB: Let's broaden this out. It could be that, in another place, at another time, another person would have set up something entirely different from Channel 40 — an independent video group, say, financing itself, not accepting any responsibility vis-à-vis the viewers and therefore operating in any way it chooses, for example as a radical political activist group, and personally I don't see why that shouldn't happen. I would be very interested to see how it works. But I'm clear that that is not what we were set up for here.

It would seem that to establish an experiment like Channel 40 properly would take a very long time?

MB: I agree 100 per cent. I reckon that a three-year period (this is based on looking at the other cable experiments) is what you need in order just to get things functioning, on a continuous basis. Then you need a second period of about three years in which the project would be partially funded and partially self-financing on a commercial basis of some kind or another. Its direction might very well be a more initiating role vis à vis programming. That might take you through to five or six years and by that time people would have learned sufficiently clearly what the potentiality of the system

is, and could then take Channel 40 over and run it entirely themselves. But I think that five or six years is scarcely enough to really handle an idea as new as this one.

Do you think that Channel 40 will get those five or six years?

MB: There are a lot of problems here. We have been turned down by the Home Office on our request to transmit low-power UHF signals. That was in October 1977. Then there is a problem about whether we should continue beyond the experimental period (up to 1979) as we serve only the cabled part of the city. Very soon, in fact in a year or two, the cabled new city part will dominate the old towns in numbers of population. Up until now that has not been the case, so I think there are real problems of possible «ghettoisation» of the old towns.

Leaving that aside, there is the question of finance: we know now that in our last operating year we were just within budget at around £50,000. Those costs are going to increase. Even with a certain amount of revenue from some local advertising, a few programmes sponsored by industry and maybe a levy on the cable subscription, we would still only provide up to half of the necessary finance. So somebody has to come up with the money. Alternatively we could scale the project down to perhaps four or five people, but then we would have to reduce to one programme a week.

The Home Office have told us unofficially that they see no reason why our licence should not be continued, if all other things are equal. Then there is an associated question — not a problem — about how the management of the project is transferred to the community, thereby making the project accountable outwards to the community, whereas now it's accountable upwards to the Home Office.

What's happening there?

MB: We are literally starting at the present time. Soon we have a meeting of a nucleus group of eight or ten interested, involved people, whom we have invited to come together. We will suggest to them the idea that they should be the core around which a broad-based community organisation could be built, which then would, in eighteen months from now, take over.

Do you think the major problem facing you is that you just don't have enough time?

MB: Yes, and there are other issues here. For example, if we were in a metropolitan situation this would be different. I'll just quote the outstanding example — Manhattan Cable (New York) which has had an open-access

policy for several years now. They have four access channels operating, two on a free basis, one on a leased basis and one on an institutional information-type basis. On average those four channels are each programmed up to twelve hours a day.

The point is that you could only do that in New York or London. There really is a finite limit to the amount of local communication that people will want in a small provincial town. It will also take a very long time, much longer than three years for a borough council, for example, to feel comfortable in making full use of a facility like this and that goes for other bureaucratic organisations such as the area health authority, the education administration and the social services. They won't use a thing like this because they have been hurt too often by newspapers.

Why should Channel 40 be allowed to continue?

MB: I'm very clear about my reason if a way can be found to finance it. The concept of an open-access communication facility, that people in a community can use for their own purposes, has its place in what I see as a broad long-range trend of change within media generally. I see this long-term trend in society manifested in increasing conflict between the need to decentralise certain functions and to centralise others. Decentralise for democratic reasons, centralise for reasons of economies of scale and control.

Now I see that trend of conflict reflected in media too and in the development of electronic media it is very clear to see. We developed television in the 1940s and 1950s and ran it for 25 years or so as an all-purpose medium, providing a generalised service over the country as a whole, with a high capital investment, high levels of skill and so on. Like the railways it provided a very good general purpose means of getting around the country. But you have to fit television's requirements as a viewer. You can't have any input as a «doer». We are therefore at a point where that sort of all-purpose development of television and radio has run its course. We've had those good general purpose public services long enough and we are now perceiving the need for more fragmented, specialised, and differentiated services, not necessarily centrally run, but in many cases locally run, with a far higher degree of access than has ever been possible before; a need for greater local accountability, a need for greater local participation in corporate structures and so on.

So since I believe that that is an on-going trend, for the next 25 years we'll see a breaking down of media forms, just as in the last 25 years it has been a

building up of large-scale forms. I see what we are doing in that context; but I also believe that video is a very hard technology to use with a cable system, because it gets so confused with television.

Until we are clearer about the legitimacy of different ways of using the technology, there will always be problems associated with using video and cable and in many ways I would like to see local radio developing on an open-access basis, because I think that it is a more flexible, cheaper and easier medium, with characteristics from the receiver end that make it more useful at the local level. If there is any future for community TV then it is with low-power UHF transmission over the air, but government policy makes it look unlikely for the 1980s.

Interview with Andrew Bibby, producer, Channel 40

One of the producers at Channel 40 is Andrew Bibby, who joined the station after a year's postgraduate education course at Exeter University. Before that he spent a year in various jobs after having graduated from Cambridge where he studied English and Economics. Although he had worked on various community papers, he hadn't encountered video before the education course, when he made a tape about housing in the local city. He began on the Channel 40 staff in the autumn of 1976. The following interview with him is based on several conversations that took place in the early months of 1978. It is intended to give a clearer impression of the day-to-day work of a local cable TV station.

What were your first thoughts on coming to Channel 40?

AB: I was impressed by many of the ideas behind the project: trying to produce a local television station which was non-exploitative, using basic television technology in a different way, enabling people to talk with each other in the community rather than just allowing a few people to talk at others. And I still feel strongly committed to those principles.

How would you describe 18 months of working here?

AB: Personally, I found working for Channel 40 both very enjoyable and extremely exhausting. Working with groups in the community is stimulating, but it's also sapping of your energy. And a project like Channel 40 does stand or fall to a large extent by the amount of time and commitment the paid workers are prepared to give to it.

How do you go about producing the hour a week of TV you are responsible for?

AB: Let me say first of all that we are neither solely a community video project nor solely a local broadcasting station — we're a bit of both, an attempt to synthesise the two, and making that synthesis work can be hard.

Our transmissions of course are open-ended; that is, their length varies from week to week depending on how much material is ready for transmission — and that, I'm sure is a very helpful and important principle. But, you're right, in practice my transmission tends to run about an hour.

I think I'd say that transmissions are only half my work — and only a part of what Channel 40's all about. Working in a school or a youth club with video may in the end not result in a programme: but there could still be very positive results from that work which come because there is a local community TV station in the vicinity with transmission facilities.

However, each weekend when I sit down with Colin (the producer who works jointly with me on the Thursday evening transmission) to plan out next week's programmes, the pressures to make sure we can «fill» a basic hour or so start being felt. It can take months and months of phone calls, evening meetings and training sessions to help a community group make a ten minute programme. So inevitably some parts of the transmissions are initiated by ourselves, or at least we're quite heavily involved in their production. Don't get me wrong — these items aren't just staff self-indulgencies: I might approach a local person who I knew had something to say, and then set up the programme for them, rather than waiting for them to approach me and do it themselves.

Colin and I also try to achieve a balance in our transmissions — some music, some short items of general interest, one or two longer features... what I hope is an interesting and watchable mixture of items. But to the extent we do this we're not just passively operating an open channel policy, that of merely distributing via cable whatever video tapes are brought to us.

Ideally, Channel 40 viewers and Channel 40 users should be the same people. But at the moment that's not the situation — so many people are still conditioned to be passive recipients of television. So there are certain conflicts between the requirements of users and viewers — if we spent all our time just meeting the needs of the former, we might well end up with only a few hours of transmission a year. We're stuck rather uncomfortably in the middle of this conflict of interest.

Can you give a particular example of this?

AB: For the first six months, the programme I produced (an arts and enter-

tainment magazine called *Preview*) was presented by local people for three or four weeks; anyone who wanted to have a go at presenting could, however «good» or «bad» they might be in traditional TV terms. I'd work hard to help the less fluent, by recording their links several times... and I'd also drop the «good» presenters after their statutory month. Now, while I still basically hold this principle, I find myself getting the «good» people to stay for some months.

Do you think that, given practice, ordinary people can produce reasonable community television?

AB: Yes, I do. I think some of our programmes show that people with no professional experience of television and no background of video can produce really excellent programmes. Not everyone can do that — but it's important for everyone to have the chance to try. I think if you encourage people to think in terms of making a communication programme so that it becomes not just a very self-indulgent exercise but a way of talking to the audience, then they are aware of the needs to make the programme interesting.

Do you assume a self-effacing role?

AB: Yes, because it is quite important that you consciously step out of taking decisions in making programmes. I think that it has to be a fairly positive withdrawal to the extent that you are not interfering, but are advising and offering suggestions. I always try, when I make recommendations, to say clearly that I am not giving instructions. Groups should not feel intimidated by our expertise.

Do you think the way the station is structured makes it easy for people to come with ideas to make tapes?

AB: Most people approach us with the idea of making a major *Horizon*-type documentary with an amazing number of techniques, a huge amount of resources and vast quantities of film. Then they realise this is going to take them months, and they may not ever finish. Some groups then immediately start losing interest; the majority keep going, but then they end up with something which is much more realistic, and which is a *community* television programme rather than a national television production.

But that's not really an answer to your question. I think that the way Channel 40 is structured, and the ethos behind the project, inevitably means that particular groups and individuals are going to find it easier to use the facilities offered.

There's one important point about access. Given a society where inequalities exist, and where some groups have far more resources than others, «community access» to television is inevitably going to favour these privileged groups.

Just to give one example. In Milton Keynes, the Development Corporation used Channel 40 regularly for about eight months to put out a weekly magazine programme about its goings-on. They were able to employ two people, who spent a large portion of their time producing this programme. How much time or money would a small community group of residents with criticisms of MKDC policy need to be able to use Channel 40 to the same extent? It's quite naïve to think that open access inevitably allows all a fair chance to get their views across.

This point was raised as early as 1974 in relation to Swindon Viewpoint's access policies, but both the projects in Swindon and here have shied away from confronting the problem. Because of this, I don't think it surprising that the people who make most use of Channel 40 are primarily middle-class, and, in the majority of cases, men. I think someone could make an interesting case for arguing that these stations have in fact had a *reinforcing* effect on maintaining the local status quo (just as national television, it can be argued, reinforces the status quo nationally).

Channel 40 philosophy is that its staff are merely neutral, passive facilitators, waiting to assist those folk who come forward to make programmes. I've already said that in practice it's not as clear-cut as this; but theoretically too, this «neutral» position is a hard one to maintain. For instance, just the way we advertise our presence in the town can affect who feels able to get involved. Another point is that we call ourselves a «community» station: but are we perhaps merely being manipulative when we hope that 12,000 disparate households can be welded together into one homogeneous group? These bring up uncomfortable political questions, and perhaps it's not surprising that cable TV stations, with Home Office licences a necessary requisite for transmitting, haven't rushed to get to grips with them.

How does the internal staff structure of Channel 40 work?

AB: That's another important question. Several of us on the staff feel strongly that our difficulties at Channel 40 are compounded by a contradiction between our formal hierarchical staff structure and the way we need to work to be efficient, which is very much as a team of equals.

I don't think the community television stations have learnt yet from other groups working in grassroots community situations. Several community arts projects, community newspapers and local theatre companies have deliberately decided to organise themselves as workers' collectives, without a director or leader with overall responsibility. Although, of course, working collectively means overcoming a set of new problems, I think this has got to be the way for future community broadcasting projects.

In lots of ways our present set-up is the result of history, the fact that cable TV companies were allowed to slip into the picture in the early 1970s by the then Conservative government under pressure from the companies running the cable networks. Inevitably the stations were set up originally as small-scale models of their parent companies; community access and the other more progressive developments came later, mainly due to the work of particular individuals working in the stations. But of course, the cable companies reflected in miniature the managerial hierarchies of conventional business. Swindon Viewpoint inherited this form from EMI and Channel 40 took over the same structure from Swindon.

We've inherited some useful things from Swindon Viewpoint, but maybe this isn't one of them. In fact, earlier this year, five of the staff decided to put a formal paper to our Board of Directors, discussing this issue and proposing a new internal structure, with full joint decision-taking among the employed staff. We saw this as a development complementary to the transition to a Board directly representative of the community. At present we've the absurd situation that no one member of the Board (which is made up of a headmaster, a clergyman, a youth worker and others with similar professional interests, and which is ultimately responsible for ensuring the project develops successfully) can receive Channel 40 transmissions. They all live outside the newly-built cabled areas!

Aren't staff dissatisfactions inevitable in any job?

AB: I think what we're talking about is staff *alienation*. A project like this requires long hours and hard work from staff members — it can't afford to employ a big team. Nobody begrudges giving their full commitment if they feel involved and responsible for their work. But if ultimate decision-taking resides in a person in managerial position, then you are in the end merely an employee, giving your labour and energies in exchange for material rewards. If this is the real situation, we'd rather accept it as such and negotiate on matters like hours of work or rates of pay. But obviously we feel it would be much more satisfactory — and much more efficient, too — if

this wasn't the case, if the workers jointly met to work out the growth and development of the project.

What do you think will happen when the project comes up for renewal in 1979?

AB: I don't want to keep this project going for the sake of survival. There is too much inclination in groups of this kind to continue at all costs. If by 1979 people don't want us to go on, then that's it. If people still think there is a need for Channel 40, I'd like to think that the money could be made available from perhaps various sources.

One of the dangers of an open-ended project is that you tend to think in terms of the organisation continuing and you tend to become more concerned with that instead of with what you are doing. I am therefore quite interested in the very short time projects that have used cable for short experiments, like the Vale of Leven in Scotland. I think there are things you can do in a very short term project that you can't do with this project.

Are you suggesting that to keep your two transmissions going 52 weeks a year is counter-productive to the idea of community TV?

AB: There are definitely contradictions that arise by continuing week after week. Community TV can become a regular alternative to commercial TV — just another button on the TV. To a certain extent I'd rather see twenty towns with community TV for six weeks than one town experiencing it for two years. I hope it isn't that choice.

In a year of transmission has Channel 40 proved its worth?

AB: Maybe!

Note:

Since mid-1979 Channel 40 has concentrated on producing radio programmes for the cable network. The bulk of the original video staff, including Andrew Bibby and Michael Barrett, have resigned. The future of the video element of Channel 40 looks bleak.

Programmes

Each quarter sees a report issued by the project director which briefly sets down what the station has been doing in those three months. The following extracts — taken from *Progress Report IV, July to September 1977* — give some idea of the type and quantity of output:

During the third operational quarter, thirty programmes were transmitted (sixty including repeats). Thirty-five hours of programme material were produced (seventy transmitted) comprising 188 programme items (excluding presentation, incidental information etc.).

After nine months a total of 590 programme items had been produced and transmitted, some 114 hours of programming.

The first five live programmes were undertaken during late August, early September. The first programme rather surprisingly kept both phone lines busy for sixty minutes although this level of response was not sustained during the following programmes. However, a number of hitherto unanswered questions were satisfactorily answered. Firstly, there were no crank or problem callers, nor any attempt to take advantage of the live situation by participants. Secondly, there were no major technical problems, although live transmission was found, as expected, to make heavy demands on staff.

During the third quarter 434 tapes were recorded, of which sixty per cent were shot on half-inch tape, and forty per cent were shot on three-quarter inch tape. Of the half-inch recorded tapes, fifty-five per cent were shot by community producers and forty-five per cent by staff. Since early 1978, one of the weekly transmissions is live with taped inserts.

Of the three-quarter inch recorded tapes, thirty-one per cent were programme content and sixty-nine per cent were post-production or presentation. Of the fifty-two programme content tapes the majority were shot in the studio with the mobile unit surprisingly underutilised.

On average each week nineteen programme items were transmitted (excluding links, titles, incidental information etc.). The average transmission length was seventy minutes, with the average length of individual programme items at eleven minutes.

Audience research

At the time of writing, the field-work for Phase II of the research (being carried out by an independent, external body) is not yet completed, but a small number of questionnaires have been examined to obtain some approximate

indication of audience levels.

Figures in the following paragraphs can not be taken as accurate or reliable until the research is completed and analysed.

It appears, after only ten months of transmission, that in one cabled home out of every six, one or more Channel 40 programmes may be viewed *regularly each week*. It confirmed, this level of about sixteen per cent of cabled households would seem rather higher than expected.

On a conservatively estimated base of 10,000 homes able to receive Channel 40, and calculating between two and three viewers per home, this figure would appear to indicate a *regular, every-week* audience size somewhere in the region of 3,500 to 5,000 new city residents.

Participation

It is expected that by December, 1977, when Channel 40 will have completed its first year of operation, the levels of participation in programming over the year will be approximately as follows:

1. Between 500—600 local groups and organisations in Milton Keynes will have produced their own programmes.
2. Between 300—400 individuals will have recorded their own programme material, operating cameras and other equipment independently.
3. Between 3,500—4,000 individuals will have expressed themselves or been depicted in some significant way in a programme.

Examples of programme content produced during July to September 1977

(For reasons of space, only the first two items under each heading have been included from the original report.)

PRODUCER OR TITLE

Live Phone-In

Milton Keynes — where are we going?

(I)

Milton Keynes — where are we going?

(II)

PROGRAMME CONCEPT

Studio discussion. Academic, writer, businessman, housewives, ex-councillor.

MKDC General Manager, Hospital Action Group, housewives, academic.

Information

Preview and what's on information
(weekly)

«Know—how» (weekly)

Coming week's events e.g. clubs,
meetings, concerts, films etc.

Skills-exchange contact information
(captions).

Education

Slated Row Special School

Aims and activities of newly opened
school.

Government sponsored centre for
training and retraining.

Community Affairs

Springfield

Documenting early days in newly
opened housing estate.

Old age pensioners centre.

Treetops Club

Young People

Let's Get Moving

Thursday and Friday transmis-
sions, including youth information.

Careers service officer discusses
school-leaver job opportunities.

Careers advice

Women

WRVS

Menopause

Information about events and
advice.

Disadvantaged

DIAL

Handicapped children

Disabled Information and Advice
Link.

Information and advice.

Health

«Healthwise»

Area Health Authority on anti-
parasite hygiene.

Club opens for Physically Han-
dicapped and Able Bodied.

PHAB

Events

Bletchley Carnival

City Show

Documented

Documented

Music

«Song of the Nightingale»

John Close narrates, sings own songs. Illustrated by Stantonbury pupils.

Folk by the Lake

Local folk artists at Willen Lake.

Churches

Jubilee Service

Local boroughs contribute to inter-denominational service.

«Contact» series

Inter-denominational Christian group.

Sport

Various, including archery, sailing races, football and motor-cycle scrambling.

Miscellaneous

«As I like it»

Young German student-teacher's view of the new city.

Cabaret

Bean Hill Flat Earth Society.

Environment

«Wild life in the city» (series)

Natural History Society on local fauna and flora.

«Focus on Farming» (series)

National Farmers Union on agriculture in the area.

Employment

Job opportunities for youngsters (several)

Information from Careers Office.

Leisure/Recreation

Historical Vehicle rally.
Help!

Local owners drive to Brighton.
Life-savers club — advice and information.

Discussion/Debates

City Forum (series)

John Methuen, Confederation of British Industry, guest speaker.

All of the above information on programmes has been taken from *Channel 40, Progress Report IV, July to September 1977*. (Michael Barrett, Milton Keynes, December 1977).

Equipment and facilities

Reception and viewing area.

Community meeting room.

Channel 40 producers' office.

Double space as training area for portapack and tape store, and half-inch editing room.

Studio — 22 feet by 22 feet.

Studio control room.

Workshop area for equipment testing and repair.

Basic equipment is:

Studio cameras:	2 National 380 vidicons with zooms 1 National 260 vidicon with zoom
Portapacks:	6 Sony 3420 VTRs 2 Sony 3450, 4 Sony 3420 cameras
VCRs:	3 Sony U-Matic 2850 (edit) 2 Sony U-Matic 1810 1 Sony U-Matic 1210
VTRs:	4 Sony 3670 (edit)

Studio facilities include vision mixer, sound mixer, lighting, microphones, film change adaptor, character generator, time base corrector and mini-switcher.

Mobile Unit

A Ford Transit van has been converted as a mobile studio to record onto three-quarter inch, U-Matic tape, using studio cameras. It has full sound and vision mixing facilities, a roof mounting for a camera and talk-back facilities, all of which can be powered from a single 13 amp source of mains electricity.

A Channel 40 report, after almost a year's operation, noted: «There was a further increase in the amount of damage to portable half inch cameras and recorders, which continued to raise their failure rate and increased the amount of maintenance and repair time needed to keep them in working order.» The Sony 1210, and one of the 1810s had been back to the manufacturers once each, as had the third National studio camera.

List of research Material

Channel 40 — community access cable television in Milton Keynes. By Michael Barrett, August, 1976.

Channel 40 Progress Reports I—IV (June, 1976, to September, 1977).

Interviews with Michael Barrett 1976—1978

Interviews with Andrew Bibby 1977—1978

Perspective article in Video and AV Review, December, 1976, by Graham Wade.

Local Cable TV: alternative or dead end? In Sight & Sound, Spring 1977. By Graham Wade.

It's not TV. It's Channel 40. In Time Out, December 30, 1976. By Robin Imray.

Channel 40 — Towards A Cooperative Structure? June 1978. By members of the Channel 40 staff.

LIBERATION FILMS

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Liberation Films is an independent group of five film and video workers based in London. Originally they started out distributing films about the protest movement in the USA and the struggles for freedom in the Third World. Then they went into production themselves and developed a strong interest in the potential of film as a discussion aid in the grassroots movement. In their biggest experiment so far, *Project Octopus*, which stretched over several years, they explored the role of video as a facilitator in community action processes. They operated on similar lines to «Challenge for Change» in Canada by stressing the importance of involving local people and action groups in the making of video tapes about all kinds of community issues. They documented one of their video experiments on 16mm film. Its outcome, *Starting to Happen*, about a community action group in Balam, South London, was eventually shown on television in 1975 and had an encouraging impact on the debate about future possibilities of grassroots video.

Another video experiment, this time in Poplar, East London, generated the idea for an eighty minute film on the history of this East End community. The in-depth documentary was produced in close cooperation with local people, who helped in the planning and execution of the project. *Fly a Flag for Poplar* was one of the first exciting local history films and has been shown in Poplar dozens of times to all kinds of audiences. The documentary has already contributed a great deal to the cultural self-awareness of the Poplar community.

Liberation Films adopted a variety of approaches. They have not given up film production in favour of the much cheaper medium of video, but believe that each medium has its advantages to be appropriately exploited. They use video in short-term community projects to highlight a specific issue and stimulate discussion about it. But they use 16mm film as soon as they want to make a more sophisticated documentary as in one of their more recent productions, *Morgan's Wall*, a film about different London groups painting wall murals. These films are then fed into their own national distribution network, reaching a wide audience generally interested in new ideas about the arts, politics and education at the grassroots level.

In the following account of Liberation Film's work, their short history is traced back to the anti-Vietnam War movement. It is interesting to follow the group's development through the heyday of community action in the early 1970s and to see how they started to widen their production into films and video tapes for community use and the purely educational *Trigger Films* about health, which were tailor-made for discussion in the classroom.

From the Angry Arts Film Society to Liberation Films

Like so many other cultural activities, the art of film-making underwent some dramatic changes as a result of the questioning process which culminated in the alternative culture movement of the 1960s. In the USA it was the *Newsreel Group* which rediscovered the need for the opening up of film production and distribution. In the light of the 1960s events, in particular the mounting opposition to the war, the establishment media operated on the principle that only information considered by their «owners» as fit for public consumption would be distributed. Therefore people on the fringes began to realise that their new life-style and attitudes could only be effectively spread by building up a strong information network of their own. Alternative vehicles for the transmission of news and opinion grew up in the form of underground newspapers, posters, and street theatre performance.

The radical *Newsreel* film-makers added a powerful visual dimension to the aims of the movement, incorporating a fast and flexible service for showing films around New York City as well as in more than a dozen other locations all over the country¹. The group was fortunate to inherit 180,000 feet of unexposed black and white 16mm film at no cost. This immense footage was sufficient to produce about 80 hours of documentary. *Newsreel's* intentions were basically threefold:

- to provide a rapid coverage of events considered to be of importance as pointers to change in the US. For example the Pentagon and Hilton demonstrations, the ghetto rebellions and the Vietnam draft issue.
 - to provide educational studies, looking at areas of society specially subject to public ignorance. For example urban renewal, hippie communes and group counselling services.
 - to provide tactical information for immediate use. For example how to deal with mounted police, the geography of the sites of planned demonstrations, and how to use guerilla theatre productions or street film projections in the organisation of the community.
- (for further information on the *Newsreel Group* see appendix 2).

The Angry Arts Film Society

Soon things started to happen in Britain as well. In October 1968 over 100,000 protesters marched through London in opposition to the US escalation of the war in South-East Asia. The *Vietnam Solidarity Campaign* became the umbrella organisation for many groups including the *Americans Against the War in Vietnam*. Among other things these American exiles or-

ganised poetry readings, workshops, and music events all relating to the War. They constituted a special organisation called *Angry Arts* and in 1968 they staged a big cultural event at the Roundhouse, London. They also imported Newsreel films from the States to show them as part of the Angry Arts weekend. These were so successful that many requests started to come in for screenings all over the country and so US-Angry Arts decided to keep the Newsreel copies in Britain. A new *UK-Angry Arts Film Society* was set up for UK distribution and to exhibit any film of a radical nature in regular film programmes.

At that time Tony Wickert, Marie and Geoff Richman, who later became the founder members of Liberation Films were all involved in the Angry Arts Film Society.

From 1969 onwards it became clear that the era of large mass rallies against the Vietnam War was over and that the movement had to broaden its political perspective. The one and only film made by the US/Canadian couple who originally organised the Angry Arts film distribution already prepared the ground for this change of attitude. *End of a Tactic?* was a 15-minute documentary about the October 68 demonstration held in London. Using the forecasts and comments of organisers and participants, with some action shots of what actually happened, the film explored the significance of the mass demonstration as a tactic and the reasons why it was increasingly failing to live up to expectations. As a consequence the Angry Arts Film Society began to include documentaries about struggles in the Third World into their distribution catalogue and screening programme. Then the need for producing, as well as screening films about the UK, was slowly becoming the centre of attention. The group wanted to make films relating to the contemporary political debates in Britain itself.

In 1970, Tony Wickert together with Sue Crockford and Ellen Adams, a Canadian, started to work on *A Woman's Place*, a 32-minute film about the emerging women's liberation movement. «Filming began at the women's liberation conference in Oxford, February 1970. This was the first large gathering of women making radical demands since the suffragettes, and the media treatment was generally pretty similar to that of fifty years before — derisive and aggressive. The women themselves were therefore very wary of being filmed and misrepresented.» (16mm film catalogue of Liberation Films). The film uses the conference as a base for its look into the pros and cons of the women's demands: equal pay, equal educational opportunities, free contraception, free abortion on demand, and free day nurseries. A year later the production team covered the women's liberation demonstration of

March 6, 1971, through London, and that footage with street interviews of students, housewives and mothers was linked with the material from the Oxford conference. The final film, made on a shoestring budget, was nondidactic and avoided a here-is-the-problem-this-is-the-answer type of script-structure. *A Woman's Place* was deliberately open-ended and designed for screening to small discussion groups. It was an important and successful first step in the direction of a new form of action-orientated film-making.

The community film shows

During the same period the Angry Arts Film Society began to discuss the political relevance of distributing and showing their stock of left-wing films. It was thought necessary to break out of the intellectual ghetto and reach new audiences not already involved in the movement. Out of that debate emerged the idea of working more closely with the growing grassroots movement in the community.

As a first attempt to work within a specific community context Tony Wicket, Geoff and Marie Richman together with other people staged in 1970 a one week event at the Venus Cinema in Kentish Town, London. It was a multi-media show about World War II experiences on the home front. Old films of that period were screened and a special tapeslide show produced which recorded interviews with Camden people who went through it all. The *People's War* event wanted the older generation to step forward and discuss the present lack of community spirit. Does it need another disaster to make us live together in a better and more creative way? And why aren't inner city neighbourhoods sufficiently attractive to make people want to stay there and develop a feeling of community? People were invited to enjoy the show and to contribute their own experience, suggestions, and ideas to answer the vital questions.

The positive response to the *People's War* show led the group in 1972 into an intensively experimental period to try to discover the effectiveness of community film shows in drawing a wider cross section of people together, in identifying areas of concern and in encouraging participation in working towards social change. Those evenings, although informally organised and entertaining, were intended as a focal point for stimulating discussion about community action.

The evenings were introduced by one or two short films and tape slide presentations. They ended with a 15-minute tape slide show portraying people's opinions in that particular neighbourhood. The idea was to go round

that locality on a Saturday a week or so before the show conducting general interviews, asking people what they felt about the area, what they would like to see happen, or change themselves. These edited interviews, which closed the film shows, injected a sense of immediacy. But most crucial was the style of discussion after the shows:

Tony Wickert: «We tried to get the people who came along to talk to each other. Our concern with the community film shows was to see whether we could get people to change their positions by dispelling prejudice and by letting them share opinions with other people. We made the audience form into groups and we, the organisers — some eight to ten people — would assign ourselves to different groups and elaborate and develop views in that way.»

Geoff Richman: «Our experience in community shows told us there was a real need for good film about community life in Britain that community groups could use to stimulate thought and action — and film that was about people actively doing something about their situation, rather than television style documentaries which wallowed in issues of gloom and despondency, demonstrating once more all that was wrong with contemporary society.»

All You Need's an Excuse

In the middle of the community film show experiment, in autumn 1972, Liberation Films finished their first short film on community action. This ten-minute, black and white and colour production, made on a miniscule budget of £180, was conceived as a discussion starter. It tells the story of a parents group in north London, occupying some unused, private land for conversion into playspace. The first section is compiled from still shots of a woman, whose voice-over commentary describes her problems. She mentions the dangers of heavy traffic in an area where children have nowhere but the streets to play. Over a still of her dusting she talks about her low expectations of change, her inability to become involved because of shyness and her lack of contact with neighbours: «You can't, without some reason, attempt to get close to somebody. You need an excuse.»

The film contrasts her feelings with those of the parents group, who have occupied British Rail's derelict land, cleaning it up and transforming it into a badly needed playground. They comment on the friendships formed, and how the barriers between them crumbled. Finally their enthusiasm leads to the decorative painting of an iron railway bridge, an event marked in the film by a sudden transfer to colour and rock music. As soon as the film was completed, *All You Need's an Excuse* was tried out in the community film shows, where it was an immediate success.

Liberation Films

1972 was a year of culminating activities. The community film shows and the work on *All You Need's an Excuse* was encouraging the group to push further in the direction of community filming. It was in this optimistic atmosphere, in February 1972, that Liberation Films was officially founded as a non-profit distributing company limited by guarantee. The three founding members were Geoff Richman, a GP, Marie Richman, a housewife and Tony Wickert who came from working in film, television and theatre. His job before joining was as a freelance director for the BBC and he wanted to bring these professional skills to Liberation Films.

Later came Ron Orders, who had been teaching photography at a college of further education and Caroline Goldie, who joined in 1974 when *Fly a Flag for Poplar* was under way. She had studied German and Drama and had done some educational broadcasting at college. At one stage there was a sixth member, Roger Buck, a professional film editor, who began editing *Starting to Happen* in 1974 and was then continuously employed for 18 months editing several other films and participating on the video projects as well.

Besides becoming involved in a number of community video and film projects the collective continued to operate as a servicing agency, distributing films to teachers, lecturers, community workers, student groups, film clubs and political organisations. Their catalogue contains over 70 films, including documentaries on US and UK political movements, oppressed racial groups, community action, workers movements, women's liberation, as well as specific productions on Vietnam, Cuba, China, Spain, Africa, USSR, France and Ireland. The group views its aims as:

- To help people seek an understanding of the society and community in which they live.
- To raise the questions of control and responsibility in this society.
- To report on and distribute the available knowledge about those countries which have or are seeking self-determination.
- Generally to help people understand the forces that control their lives, in such a context and style that liberation is seen as a necessary step towards building a truly self-determining and socialist society.» (Liberation Films 16mm and video catalogue)

In addition to distributing prints by simply collecting bookings and despatching the films, the group supplies information on types of film and how to use them in education and the community. People are usually grateful for

assistance in locating the best available film for their needs. Also Liberation Films organises training weekends on how to use film and video in community action, attracting community workers and teachers from all parts of the UK.

Project Octopus

The community film shows had given the group experience of using film and tape slide as a focus for discussion. In three shows in Hackney, East London, video equipment had been introduced for the first time to record the discussion following the tape slide presentation of local interviews. In these video sessions residents were encouraged to use the camera and microphone to interview each other. In one of the communities this brought to the surface a wish to organise an adventure playground. The video tapes were replayed to a larger audience the following week and their impact led to the formation of a group of adults and children who cleared a local site in preparation for a playground. A real sense of involvement was achieved. That experience as well as incoming information about the *Challenge for Change* experiments in Canada supplied the incentive for *Project Octopus*³. Project Octopus was an experiment to test out the possibilities of community video. The whole eight-step process was to be recorded on film.

Geoff Richman: «We hatched this beast in a steamy kitchen over coffee. It was our first real attempt to get a grant. Thames Television, the London weekday commercial station, had given money to the Greater London Arts Association (GLAA) to be doled out in lumps of £500 for encouraging new projects. As usual, the closing date was the next day and we hastily sketched out a video project in eight steps, because we had never really used video and wanted to learn.»

The eight arms of Project Octopus were:

1. Trigger film

Contact is made with a community group who are active and enthusiastic about participating in the project. The project team visits the community and prepares a fifteen minute black and white 16mm film about the area by interviewing residents about their attitudes to living there and their response to local community activities. The film is roughly assembled and magnetic edge striped for showing a week later on a normal 16mm projector.

2. Community film show

The film is shown as the final item in an evening of films about other London communities. The evening, held in a local hall and publicised widely in

the area, is intended to be an entertaining and enjoyable experience. At the same time it should provide the opportunity for people to talk about themselves and the place where they live.

3. Introduction to video

The discussion following the trigger film is videotaped by the project team, who attempt to involve local people in using the video packs themselves to interview each other. A group of people who are most enthusiastic will be invited to make their own video tapes about their community. This group should consist as far as possible of people who have not been active in the community in the past.

4. Video tape

The local group meets the project team and is trained by them in basic techniques. The objectives of the group are clarified. The feeling of fun and novelty should be encouraged to overcome shyness and lack of confidence. Door-to-door and vox-pop interviews will be collected and local ideas and issues explored as the group becomes more inspired. Two 1/2-inch Sony VTR's will be available. The project team would now be playing the part of consultants and staying as far as possible in the background.

5. Editing the tape

The group meets on several occasions to view and assess their video material. The tapes are edited and a format and date for presentation to the community are set.

6. Community video show

Widely advertised within the community, the evening will be entirely devoted to tape showing and discussion. TV monitors will allow for small group discussion and the expectation should be for an entertaining evening made by local people for local people. Themes for discussion and ideas for activity will obviously emerge but the overall expectation should be open-ended.

7. Compilation film

A compilation of film material and tape transferred to film will be made. The resultant film would be of immense use to other community groups, primarily as a source of inspiration for activity and involvement.

8. Inter-community film show

The original community group will be encouraged to take their film and a projector to another community as part of a community film show in that area. In this way, it is hoped that the stimulus they provide can reach out into other areas.

(Liberation Films in: «Film and Video Extra», August, 1973. A publication of the Greater London Arts Association (GLAA).

Geoff Richman: GLAA thought it was a splendid idea and encouraged us to put in a new application for £2,500, they granted us £2,000 for the video part, lopping off £500 for the film element of the project. We decided we were going to do the compilation film about the development of the project anyway, and set off to explore London. We found three areas (Balham, Plumstead and Poplar) where there were active groups willing to undertake the experiment. It was important to us to be working with groups, and not trying to persuade or enthuse individuals in a «cold» area that they ought to get together and do something.»

Starting to Happen

Project Octopus was launched in June 1973, in Balham, a mixed residential area in South London, where the Balham Action Group had already started an adventure playground for local children. Geoff Richman: «All went according to plan, we shot our trigger film, the audience packed a local nursery, and after the show, the children were ineffectively kept quiet in half the room, while the adults discussed everything in the area from traffic to prostitution. The next day a self-selected group came and learnt to use the video, went out and interviewed residents on two broad areas of concern — rubbish in the streets, and the need for a community centre.»

During the week a dramatic event added an unforeseen dimension to the recording of the street interviews. A child was knocked down on Bedford Hill, a notorious accident blackspot. Mothers organised a protest sit-down, stopping the traffic, actions the video crew recorded.

One of the people interviewed on an earlier tape had mentioned the difficulty of encouraging people to unite — a view then overtaken by events. The Balham tape makers then decided what they wanted from their material and Liberation Films carried out the technical editing. A show was then arranged at the local library, only one week after the trigger film presentation at the nursery. Over a hundred people turned up, and the following debate was lively. «I've lived here since 1941», said one woman, «and I've never met half the people in this room.»

Liberation Films made their own 16mm documentary of the Balham video experiment, an undertaking which put them into considerable debt because no grant giving body was able to share the same enthusiasm for it. The 42-minute film *«Starting to Happen»* gives an exciting account of how community use of video can serve as a sparking point for local initiative. It was starting to happen in Balham, but the spontaneous reaction to the road accident was the event that set the chain in motion. Also the assembly and the

showing of the video tapes and then the film, made a positive contribution to the further growth of community activity in Balham — in the form of a new Residents Association, a Law and Advice Centre, the crossing, and the initiation of a video resource by the London Borough of Wandsworth for community groups.

Six months after the video experiment in Balham, «*Starting to Happen*» was shown on the BBC 2 Open Door programme and proved to be a great success in encouraging community video. In retrospect it is difficult to understand the timidity of GLAA's film and video panel in not funding the production of the documentary. The film showed how well suited video can be as a triggering device in community development and how wrong it would be to minimise its potential by applying professional product-standards. The film contains sections of the video tape material shot by the local people transferred onto 16mm film. An interesting point emerging from this material — as expressed by one of those involved — is that by making their own interviews the local people were able to talk to each other «in a different way to the way someone from the BBC might interview us.» What the differences are and what this potential amounts to made interesting subjects for discussion at community film shows.

While events at Balham continued, the Liberation Films collective moved to their next stop at Plumstead, where the local youth theatre wanted to be more closely involved with the community. The film crew interviewed people in the streets and the pubs and made contact with a well established social club. Apart from this meeting place for elderly people there was hardly any community life because the area had been extensively redeveloped, including many new tower blocks. The response at the subsequent community film show was not very encouraging. Geoff Richman: «We did our

Community film shows were intended as a focal point for stimulating discussion about community action. The film shows helped to identify areas of concern and encouraged participation in working towards change. ▼

A community film show in Poplar.

Tony Wickert: «We tried to get the people who came along to talk to each other. Our concern with the community film shows was to see whether we could get people to change their positions by dispelling prejudice and by letting them share opinions with other people. We ►





Balham Video Project.

Local residents learnt to use the video equipment, went out and interviewed people on two broad areas of concern – rubbish in the streets and the need for a community centre.



Balham Video Project

Video is a medium well suited for process work. The instant replay capacity makes video most useful for collective projects where a group wants to involve people in the shooting and editing of a tape.







The Deputy Mayor, Charles Edwin Sumner, leading the march of Poplar councillors to the High Court, 29 July 1921, in an effort to secure equalisation of rates.

Fly a Flag for Poplar – a community film.

Geoff Richman: «It was decided the film should not have a fixed story line, but should rather present a colourful blend of five individuals talking about their contemporary life in Poplar and its past. They started to talk about how social life was, about their neighbours whose «doors were never locked», the music hall, market, pubs, outings and hop-picking. But they also spoke about the political history and the early days of a militant Labour Party. The film would have to weave together all those elements, private and personal, public and communal, past and present.»

Video project about working conditions at Penk Frenn Factory

Liberation Films is not limiting their work to community communication alone. In a period of economic crisis audio-visual media should be used increasingly to promote consciousness-raising at the work place.



show, which was enjoyed. The old folks and the actors from the theatre group got along famously. But when it came to asking who wanted to use the video, the audience faded away. It was clear that we had seriously erred in accepting the feeling of the theatre group director that the company would be willing to involve themselves in an experimental project. We should have talked to them collectively. It is also clear that an area where there is no community life is unlikely to blossom into new activity without a considerable investment of time and a continuing presence. It is too easy to imagine that because people ought to enjoy an activity, they will jump at the opportunity.»

Fly a Flag for Poplar

The third experiment of Project Octopus started in June 1973 taking place in Poplar, Tower Hamlets, in the East End of London. Geoff Richman: «It is a solidly working class area, devastated by bombing in the second World War, and then redeveloped into high-rise council flats. Its history is closely associated with that of the docks and related industry. What distinguishes Poplar today from the majority of London suburbs is its sense of continuity with the past. A high proportion of residents were born there and have lived there all their lives. Other families have moved away only through shortage of housing and some of them continue to return there for much of their social life. There is a sense amongst local people that Poplar has retained a distinct identity. While they frequently express a desire to strengthen the present community it is usually articulated in unfavourable comparisons with past community life.»

«Poplar played a prominent part in the history of the labour movement in the UK, in particular in the dock strikes of 1889 and 1912, the militant suffragette movement, the reform of the Poor Law relief system in the 1920s, and the General Strike in 1926. Local people may no longer have a detailed knowledge of their own history, but many have a strong sense of living in an area with a political tradition. Many of the political and church leaders of the past such as Lansbury, Bartlett and Groser are still remembered today. What does survive is a certain directness and openness in tackling local issues, an energy potential for confronting matters and taking action rather than always expecting the initiative to come from higher authority.»⁴

A documentary emerges

In summer of 1973 the Teviot Festival Committee decided to organise their first local festival and invited Liberation Films to do a trigger film about the

area to show it back to the community, introducing the more interested people in the audience to the use of video. The final video tapes would then be replayed in the church during the festival. Geoff Richman: «We showed the trigger film at the local school where the combination of bad acoustics and overactive children ensured that not much of it came through. There was little discussion at the time, but afterwards we found many people had gone away and exchanged ideas about themes we brought up in their own social network. It is an error into which we too readily fall to estimate response in a rather formal, intellectual way from the immediate discussion after the film. At any rate, our volunteers for the following video project — notably two women, close neighbours and friends — came forward and we followed them on film, as they toured the area interviewing on video. Would the festival be a success? Did people think things were different in the old days — and why had it all changed?

«The two day festival was a great success indeed, thousands of people lazed on the grass in the hot sun, drinking beer and meeting old acquaintances. The video playback in the church attracted an enthusiastic crowd of over 400, who could have seen very little on three monitors lost in the vast church, but clearly shared a tremendous sense of collective enjoyment.

«This time we were determined that the limited material we had filmed would be developed into an exploration of the lives of some of the people actively involved in the organisation of the festival. What enabled them to show initiative? How did they relate to each other, what was the hidden network? What was their perspective for the future?

«We had no money, only debts, but we kept interest alive by showing the rushes of the new material to anyone from Poplar interested. We were asking for old photographs of the area and holding meetings in the community rooms rented from the church and decorated as the first fruits of the festival. The subject of the meetings was: how should the film be shaped?»

It was decided the film should not have a fixed storyline, but should rather present a colourful blend of five individuals talking about «modern» Poplar and its past. They started to talk about how social life was, about their neighbours whose «doors were never locked», the music hall, market, pubs, outings and hop-picking. But they also spoke about the political history and the early days of a militant Labour Party. The film would have to weave together all those elements, private and personal, public and communal, past and present.

Fortunately the financial problem was solved in the spring of the following year 1974, when the Production Board of the British Film Institute (BFI) came forward with a £6,000 completion grant for the film.

Work on *Fly a Flag for Poplar* developed increasingly into an exploration of the past. Geoff Richman: «A local councillor, whose father had been an MP and the leader of the «fife and drum band» which led many of the marches during the Rates Dispute of 1921, showed us a presentation album of photographs taken during the struggle. They were the work of William Whiffin, a studio photographer who lived in East India Dock Road, and were outstanding stills. We went to the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and found hundreds of superb photographs on every aspect of life in the former Borough, virtually unknown to the people in the area. They were to be a vital element in the film. We explored the collection of books and documents in the library, and draft manuscripts of the historical background to the film were circulated, and grew in size. It was clear there would have to be both a book and an exhibition to accompany the film — each complementing the other. We recorded for the book a number of very long open-ended interviews with people in their seventies and eighties. This way we were helped to see for ourselves the complex texture of history as ordinary people live it, which written documents alone cannot give. It also meant we did not rely on the main figures in the film for the interpretation of the history.

«By the time we had filmed five people, the second festival, and then gathered the archive material together, it was the autumn of 1974. This slow process is reflected in the film which moves along with the material rather than imposing itself according to a formula. There are also problems we never solved, partly through lack of money and inexperience. The cross connections between people are thin, and the historical material for many viewers of the final film outweighs the present in force and interest.

«We showed rough-cut versions first to the participants exclusively and then to open audiences in Poplar. The film was discussed in immense detail, altered and shown again. Finally, in May 1975, the film, book, and exhibition were ready. Now came the real test: would people in the East End like it? The premiere was set in the old Town Hall, now the Poplar Civic Theatre. As we prepared the show that evening, the attendants crowded round the photographs, fascinated, reminiscing about the old days. Over 300 people came and we were all very emotional. During the next six months we put on about 30 shows in local halls and schools to audiences varying from 300 to 20. About 1,500 copies of the book were sold, avidly read and passed on

to neighbours. Tower Hamlets bought a print of the film, and 25 copies of the book. They also held an exhibition of Whiffin photographs drawing about 3,500 visitors.»

What effect did your film have on the Poplar community?

Tony Wickert: «There are not great monuments to our work in the community. But there are lots of incidental things and if I try to recount them I sound like I am justifying our presence. The best way to try and evaluate this sort of work and our approach is for you to go to them and ask what they think. You should also ask what would have happened if we had not been there. We can look towards the development of the schools' use of video, towards the development of the Law Centre and of the community festival, or to the way the rooms next to the church have been turned into a community centre. These are small points, but I think all of us feel — as do the people of Poplar we have met — it is much more the raising of ideas that is the main contribution of our presence. So it isn't the film in itself that is important; it is the questions and the ideas raised by looking at the film.»

Trigger Films for health education in schools

After 1971, when *All you need's an excuse* was produced, Liberation Films started to experiment with educational films about preventive medicine, which were tailor-made for classroom discussion. This aspect of Liberation Films' work has been developed in parallel to the community projects and reflects the methods of open-ended film-making. The educational film for the classroom has been a problem for some time. They tend to be overtly instructive and are often just boring to watch. Geoff Richman: «The conventional film with its linear structure, making points clearly, one after the other, with a narrative commentary linking the sequences, is telling the audience what to think however the film ends. And what are they supposed to do? Without room to move emotionally through the film, to explore life with the characters, they can only feel at the end impressed or stunned, but hardly in a mood to act.»

So Liberation Films produced so-called *trigger films*, very short, fictional narratives on topics like teeth care, sexually transmitted diseases, mental health and smoking. These teaching tools come in series of two or three interrelated shorts which are intended to be shown with extensive discussion breaks in between. A viewing of *Sexually transmitted diseases*, 21-minutes colour, exemplifies the basic structure of such an educational trigger film.

The first of the three sections stimulates thought about health in general. Janet feels unwell and does not want to go to school. Her mother persuades her to go anyway, but says she must see how she feels by lunchtime. On the way to school she passes a pregnant woman and sexual phantasies about her relationship with her boyfriend flash quickly through her mind. Later in school she forgets about feeling unwell and enjoys trampoline exercises in the gym. The film raises the question of how do you decide you are unwell and how does health respond to psychological problems arising from teenage sex.

In the second film a boy thinks he may have venereal disease, but who can he talk to, how can he find out what to do, where should he go? In turn he listens to his friends discussing VD in a light-hearted fashion, fails to discuss it with his teacher and then this father, feels too shy at his doctor's consulting room, and finally the film concludes with a frozen shot outside a VD clinic. Will he go in, or is he still too frightened?

In the third part the boy has returned from the clinic and decides to visit the girl from whom he had caught the infection. He does this rather than leaving it to the social worker employed by the clinic. The underlying theme of responsibility emerges into the open. It is shown to be in conflict with prevailing moral standards, which still fail to acknowledge the right of teenagers to develop healthy sexual relationships. All three shorts were especially designed to deal with delicate social problems in a way that would not immediately alienate young viewers. Rather they set out to promote a strong sense of self-identity.

All the trigger films have been tested successfully in classrooms, but only where teachers are able and willing to experiment with film as a tool rather than as an easy substitute for discussion. Tony Wickert: «There is still a prejudice about film. We find that very few teachers are excited by the potential of film. They want summaries, they want collections of information, they want films to be like television programmes which supply answers. And we are continuously excited about the potential of film to work in another way. That is to complement people's ability to be observant and to make their own deductions from what they see; and to produce films that will help in that process.»

How Liberation Films work as a group

Money

How does Liberation Films finance its projects?

Tony Wickert: «At the moment we have money from the Arts Council and from the Gulbenkian Foundation (up to 1978), which pays fulltime wages for three of us. Arts Council money started to flow in 1975 and Gulbenkian's the year before that. The Arts Council grant is annually renewable and Gulbenkian's is not. They gave it for a fixed period of three years. I get £50 a week from the Arts Council and Gulbenkian give £25 a week to Ron and Caroline and their income is made up to £50 a week by an Arts Council grant. So all of us get £50 a week (1977). I find it very difficult to live on that and that's why all of us go and augment it with some teaching money.»

Caroline Goldie: «Besides the financial reason for doing that, it is important for us all to keep teaching because we are working in a broadly educational area and so we like to have contact with teachers and students, and use our films, try them out and get a response for ourselves.»

On top of the basic income, Liberation Films has to apply for additional grants to cover the material production costs. The Health Education Council, for example, gave a sizeable grant for an educational film on smoking and the Arts Council has granted the documentary on street art. So far the major problem for Liberation Films has been the fact that there is no single source for production grants.

Tony Wickert: We have had no success with second applications to the BFI or the GLAA. As I understand it, the British Film Institute (BFI) is a state financed organisation with the brief under its articles of association to support all aspects of film production. I suspect they don't seem to be too concerned for their responsibilities for political reasons. They are apprehensive about what would happen to the money they receive from the Department of Education and Science. What the BFI is worried about is releasing public money, earmarked for film and video production, being used for films and video tapes which would spark change, political change, at a community level. To make films like this, they argue, is to use film as an extension of social work, and they feel that therefore the money should come from the local authorities or the Ministry of Health and Social Security.»

Do you think that the present socio-political climate in the UK encourages the emergence of groups like Liberation Films? What has changed since 1968?

Tony Wickert: «No. When we do get encouragement it is from our own working situation. As for funding I have no indication whether it is better or worse than it was in 1968; at least for several years there was a bit more money available in the public expenditure sector — and the bulk of our money came from that area. Whether that changed for the better the independent film-makers' situation — I have my doubts. There is little evidence of the government reaching an understanding about the potential of film and video in relation to social issues like the National Filmboard of Canada has done.»

«But the fascinating question to ask is: if we take the events of 1968 and we add the present social cohesion and means of communication, do we also possess a more effective tactic for change than we had then? My answer is: yes, we do, although I still think that the use of alternative media is underdeveloped. I believe we are now in a better position. We wouldn't make the same mistakes again. Should a similar struggle arise again, we would be much more able to take the initiative. There were few magazines or periodicals or community newspapers in 1968, and there was certainly not much radical film-making and film distribution going on. Now there is the *Newsreel-Collective (UK)* and ourselves, the *Berwick Street Collective*, *Cinema Action* and *The Other Cinema Distribution*. And there must be many more around the country, like, for example, the *Sheffield Film Group*. If 1968 happened again we would immediately call a meeting from the whole of the country and talk; that's the difference, they didn't exist before.»

If the BFI and the Arts Council should fund you and other groups much more than now, where could they raise the additional money from?

Tony Wickert: «I suppose we would like to be funded like Challenge for Change in Canada. They receive their income from an amalgamation of government agencies and the National Film Board. To give an equivalent in this country: the Department of Environment, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Overseas Development, Agriculture and Fisheries and the BFI should jointly set up a fund and we would ask each one of them to allocate £250,000. With a total of, say, £1.5 million we could undertake projects in all aspects of life. And here of course there are similarities to the thirties; the British realist and documentary film movement. At that time a glimmer of this possibility emerged with the father of the movement, John Grierson, who first set up a state sponsored documentary production team under the Empire Marketing Board in the early 1930s. Then the same man built up the National Film Board of Canada during the second World War. And it is

now through that National Film Board that Challenge for Change gets its money from the different Canadian government agencies.» (see also chapter on Background)

Workstyle

How do you work as a collective?

Tony Wickert: «I would like to separate what is legally required for a company to operate from what we need as a method of organising ourselves to plan and carry out our work collectively. The legal niceties one is obliged to go through are not very significant. One can form a non-profit company, a company that is limited by guarantee, which has no capital and no distribution of profit, and if profit is made, it goes back into the company. Charitable organisations are beneficiaries of certain concessions, certain tax reductions, rate reductions, and so on. The restriction that would apply to us is one we would find prohibitive — a charity is obliged not to intervene directly in politics.»

Caroline Goldie: «All decisions, like planning activities, are made collectively. When it comes to the actual making of a film we have to sort out what each one of us is going to do. Because we are applying an open-ended approach to projects, without a set script, it can obviously lead to conflict, where two of us are thinking of something developing in quite a different direction; and then we have to coordinate it in some way. But we all get excited about the films that do work in school and community contexts. We look at the positive things we have done and that helps us go on to the next project. Something I personally feel is lacking is some way of systematically looking back at projects and talking about them in retrospect. We tend to just work on without looking back too much.»

Who does the actual filming in the group?

Caroline Goldie: «For the Poplar film we used a professional crew, but Tony did a lot of the sound. On the other films we mainly used a crew too. But now we want to crew ourselves — that is a long term aim. So the street-art film *Morgan's Wall*, has been entirely shot by us. I have been doing most of the sound and Ron the camera.

Co-operation with other groups

Tony Wickert: «It was interesting to discuss the organisational structure of our group because that is the kind of information we would like to know about other community media groups. This information would make it pos-

sible to offer guidelines to newcomers in the field. It would save them time, effort and money. But the fact is very few people inquire and try to find out how we actually operate. But we are in touch with other groups. Groups we have informal contact with are Interaction, the Basement, and the Albany. Our group-meetings so far have been very friendly and issue-orientated, in that we have come together to deal with a particular problem like the lack of funding. In a recent meeting I said to discuss financial issues was only partly beneficial to our mutual needs. It would be better if we had get-togethers, workshops, where we showed our work to each other and talked about the ideologies of our individual approaches. So there would then be the possibility of sharing a lot more of our more private thoughts and feelings about the way we work and its effect. Such an analysis should help develop a new confidence about what we are doing. I find it very difficult to talk in a meeting for more than ten minutes about money. It is not always money that is stopping us. We have to be excited about what we are doing. If we work for too long and in too isolated a manner on a project, we get bored and become uncertain. So we can easily be consumed by our problems and then we might loose heart.»

Technical standards

Tony Wickert: «An important question for us is how well a film should be made from a purely technical point of view. That is something for continuing consideration. Our general findings at Liberation Films follow these lines: We must have certain minimum standards. Images must be clear, and especially important is the quality of the sound. In the process of editing there are two considerations to be made. One is the editing of the story in relation to people's needs and the responsibility we have as an outside group to that. The other consideration concerns the use of montage as a technique of editing — from this comes the power of images placed one after the other.

But we should not try to copy the sophisticated editing processes of the big film industry who sometimes couldn't care less about manipulating the images of people in every way. And that means being able to come back to them as part of a continuing relationship. We cannot use them for some ideal which we think in the end is going to be for their good. The trigger films (as well as trigger video tapes and trigger tape slides) confess to a confusion in a situation rather than to an over-view of order. So the audience can identify.»

What are the specific advantages of the media you have experimented with? When do you use film and when video?

Tony Wickert: «Film, it appears from our work, is best applied when we really want to go deeply into people's imagination; then film is essential because we need a persuasive process. We want to evoke the full force of the medium to be able to get people to consider what we are talking about. Film is, for us, the most powerful. It doesn't mean that video is not effective, but with film, sitting in a blacked out room with control over sound, the big image and the possibility of all kinds of operation with that image — whether in colour or black and white — that seems to be the area which is worth exploring more. Whereas video has a different potential. It is better for examining parochial aspects of life. It is also fine if we want to work quickly. With video we would collect on one day and produce a half-hour show for the people in the community the next night, almost an impossibility with film. What is stimulating about video is that the material can be used in a variety of ways. Good organisation in the making of the tapes means that we have access to that information all the way through a project. If it is a long term programme then tapes can be used in a different context, in a different way, reedited many times over.»

Project work, 1978 – 1979

Morgan's Wall. 16mm. Colour. 53 mins.

A film documenting a number of mural painters working in London.

Forever is a long time. 16mm. Colour. 30 mins.

A trigger film on how to give up smoking.

The professionals. A trigger video tape.

Five stories based around dentistry as a profession.

A 30 min. video tape on the treatment of stammering.

Made for a speech therapy department of an Area Health Authority.

A 20 min. video tape about a geriatric screening programme run by the Camden and Islington Area Health Authority.

The video tape has been produced as part of an attempt to stop the Area Health Authority discontinuing this service.

A 30 min. video tape about the youth section of the Labour Party. The tape is devised to stimulate discussion among young people about why and how people become politically conscious.

A 30 min. video tape for the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). The tape is based around a series of interviews with NUPE members and is designed to stimulate discussion at branch level.

Planned projects:

A series of video tapes for use within schools around topics such as work, school, race, and prejudice. Liberation Films will be working with a group of final year children in a large multi-racial comprehensive school.

A video tape on abortion.

A video tape about the role of women within the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). The tape is based around a series of interviews with NUPE

A video tape on the growth of the women's movement since 1968.

Ongoing work:

Provision of access to video and film production.

Distribution of 80 titles on film and video.

Workshops on how to show films and video tapes more effectively.

Appendix

1) Here are some of the events which Newsreel covered:

The Columbia Revolt

In May 1968 the students of Columbia University went on strike accusing the university administration of racist policies, exploitation of the local Harlem community and involvement in inhumane war research. They demanded open discussion with the university authorities who refused to recognise their requests as legitimate. In response the students occupied university buildings, living there communally, discussing policy, conducting meetings and playing music. Eventually they were violently evicted by the police.

The case against Lincoln Center

In an extensive urban renewal programme 20,000 people were moved from a working class area of New York to make room for the new Lincoln Center, a showcase for the cultural élite. A major consequence of this was that the property speculators descended and property values increased.

The Haight '68

The hippie community of the Haight-Ashbury area of San Francisco was invaded by the police. The situation rapidly deteriorated into violent

ce and arson as «the beautiful people» were forced to defend their culture against external assault.

Wilmington

A single family called Du Pont, through a gigantic corporation of the same name, effectively controls the state of Delaware. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, the National Guard was called in to occupy Wilmington, Delaware, where they remained for ten months.

Miss America 1968

Women's liberation groups disrupted the annual Miss World contest staged in the Albert Hall, Atlantic City.

Chicago Convention Challenge

In August 1968 young people poured into Chicago from all over the US to protest against the Vietnam war, the army draft and the bad treatment of blacks and other minorities. At the doorstep of the Presidential Convention of the Democratic Party, the demonstrations culminated in the famous «police riot».

- 2) Newsreel operated in a democratic and decentralised style. Between 30 and 40 film-makers participated in production and distribution with open meetings held each Wednesday. At these rushes were screened and discussed and ideas for new films considered. Completed films could only be distributed after approval from the membership, and day to day business was carried out by a coordinating committee. No attempt was made to put forward a single political line, resulting in a variety of styles and approaches. The strength of the organisation lay in its flexibility and the pace of its operations. Prints of films, usually about ten to 15 minutes long, were sent to one community group in each city, which then distributed them free to other local groups. Films were also despatched to underground press groups, the universities, anti-war groups and film-makers cooperatives.
- 3) The influence of Challenge for Change should not be under-estimated. It had a much greater impact on the philosophy and working methods of Liberation Films than the original Newsreel films of the sixties. The group was well aware of what happened in Canada and had seen several of the newer type of community films — especially the Fogo-Island series and the VTR St. Jacques Film.
- 4) What happened in Poplar in the 1920s is best illustrated by the Rates Strike of 1921:

«In 1919 the first socialist council was returned in Poplar. They were determined on changes. Faced with massive unemployment, the Council maintained a standard of poor relief which they knew the rates would not support. A poor borough like Poplar had a low rateable value. The answer was a Rates Equalisation Fund, whereby the richer boroughs would subsidise the poorer. The Council declared war on the government to make them change the law. They refused to contribute that part of the rates which went to the London County Council to pay for the metropolitan police, the asylums and Water Board. There were meetings all over the borough to explain the struggle. The Council was summoned to appear before the High Court. Thousands of people marched with them to court. They were led by the mace-bearer, not with a mace, but with an empty sardine can on a pole. The Council defied the Court ruling and refused to pay, and in September 1921 they were arrested. 24 men went to Brixton with Lansbury, then 62 years old, and five women went to Holloway. The people had formed bodyguards to protect the councillors, but as Minnie Lansbury wrote in *«The Times»*: «Nothing short of a machine-gun detachment could have got them to prison, if they had not wanted to go.»

«The Poplar councillors believed that they were fighting for the poor throughout the world, and that they would win. Every night crowds came to hear Lansbury or the Mayor Sam March make speeches from the prison windows, and to sing the red flag. The national Labour Party and the TUC denounced the councillors' action. There was a lot of pressure on them to compromise and pay in promise of a conference later. It was very hard in prison, and the health of all of them suffered. After five weeks they were let out of prison and welcomed home by a crowd of 15000 people with bands and banners. The government agreed to a Common Poor Law Fund. It was a victory that made them famous.»

Research material

The quotations of Caroline Goldie, Ron Orders and Tony Wickert have been selected and edited from tape-recorded interviews conducted in October and November 1977. The quotations of Geoff Richman have been selected and partly edited from one of his unpublished manuscripts, «Fly a Flag for Liberation Films».

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The Basement Project

Film and Video Workshop in Tower Hamlets, London

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Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on the *Basement Project Film Group* which came into being during 1972. The filming activity later expanded to include video and the Basement Project itself grew to take in many other activities. The story of this development is set down in the following pages.

The Basement's address is in Cable Street, East London, a name that has gone down in history as the shorthand for the anti-fascist demonstrations that took place there in the years preceding the second World War. The battle of Cable Street in 1936 saw Sir Oswald Mosley's blackshirted fascists prevented from entering the East End by the massive resistance of the local population.

One of the central reasons behind those events was that the area had become the first settling place for thousands of Jewish immigrants who had fled persecution all over Europe. In fact the east of London, because of its proximity to the docks, has been in receipt of many waves of immigrants. They came before the Jews and since there have been the West Indians, and, in particular, the Bangladeshi Asians.

The late 1970s have seen another spate of racial violence in the area. This time round it is the National Front which is the fascist political party and it is the Asians who are the victims. The area is dominated by the new council housing of recent years, although there are still many of the nineteenth century terraces standing. Apart from the odd pockets of trendy middle class incursion the area is essentially a poor one.

It has a high crime rate, high unemployment and also is one of the main gathering points for winos and meths drinkers. As the Jews found it is an area best moved on through. It is also the place that has become the home of *The Basement*.

This chapter is entirely based on the printed or spoken words of the Basement, and especially on those of Maggie Pinhorn, who, along with a local youth leader and artist, Dan Jones, began the project. A lot of space has been devoted to the early period and *Tunde's Film* because that production was in many ways responsible for later developments at the Basement. The film also reflects many of the preoccupations of youth in the area: unemployment, police harassment and lack of facilities.

A document issued by the Basement:

The Basement Project has three main areas of activity — a community arts workshop, an intermediate education centre for the local community and general meeting place. Our premises are provided by the Local Authority and our work is supported by the Social Services and the Inner London Education Authority and occasional grants from arts organisations and charitable foundations.

Our team of workers includes teachers, community artists, community workers, youth workers and social workers who are in contact with numerous community organisations in Tower Hamlets and lend support to a wide variety of local self-help initiatives, e.g. youth football teams, neighbourhood camping clubs, playgroups, community festivals and the community transport movement etc. In addition to these local groups, the Basement supports and/or acts as a link between many other professional responses to community development. In this category are the clubs run by the Youth Office, the Water Sports Venture on the disused dock in Shadwell Basin, THAP — the boroughwide Tower Hamlets Arts Project, the Neighbourhood Law Centre, the Adventure Playgrounds and so on.

We are also part of the Borough's broad-based Intermediate Treatment Service working on a number of approaches to children at risk. We seek to avoid the traditional individual casework approach wherever other methods are found to be effective. This has led to the development of our community arts workshop where young people can participate in a number of activities in group sessions run by part-time workers in the evenings and during the day time. The activities currently include film and video, rock music, carpentry and motor mechanics. In the past we have also run writing, drama, canoe building, photography and sewing workshops which have now moved on to operate elsewhere.

Our criteria is always to meet needs as they arise and find someone with the relevant professional skill prepared to work with a group. We also have a basic silkscreen facility and dark-room open to people of all ages in the community wishing to print simple posters and develop film.

The particular problem of long term truants has led to the formation of our Intermediate Education Centre supported by the ILEA and staffed by two teachers. The school has approximately twelve pupils with ages ranging from eleven to sixteen years. Academic work is mostly done in the mornings, creative and sporting activities in the afternoons. There is therefore a natural marriage between community arts and education and opportunity

for mixing truant and non-truant children and older members of the community at the Basement.

We are not, however, a centre-bound project and consider our outreach work to be very important. Our community and youth workers try to meet demands all over the borough and help the community with all kinds of needs. We supply inflatables for playschemes, camping equipment, run trips and outings, attend countless meetings, help active campaigns, turn up at local discos and dances, teach our skills to other groups and workers and generally lend support in the neighbourhood whenever required. All our equipment is available for use to other local community groups, the video portapack, super 8mm cameras, 16mm projector and screen for film shows, tools, typewriters, gestetner, sewing machine, minibus, etc.

Our team of workers share responsibility for all these areas of work in accordance with their skills and interests. We have regular meetings every Friday morning to discuss problems, activities and ideas. Good communication between ourselves, members of the community and the network of groups and organisations across the Borough is essential. The variety and responsive nature of the work means that we all have to be flexible and prepared to work long hours. We are constantly aware of change, social and political. Our objectives are long term and for the benefit of the whole community.

Note:

Since the above description was written increased grant aid has enabled us to really develop our community arts workshop and extended activities. We now have a fully equipped silk-screen printshop constantly producing posters and leaflets with local groups, and an enlarged and more efficient darkroom which has enabled us to renew our photography project. We are also running a bicycle workshop and 3 D environmental workshops, and we have started a training course in graphics and photography for local community and voluntary workers. The Basement writers have returned and are flourishing. Another innovation has been the Cable Street Mural Project which involves the creation of a huge mural on the side wall of old St. George's Town Hall, where we are based. The mural has an anti-fascist theme depicting the famous 1936 Battle of Cable Street. An important new outreach project is the creation of a community garden on a nearby housing estate. All this increased activity has meant that our team now includes five more community arts workers on a full-time and part-time basis. (Maggie Pinhorn, 1980)

The following extracts are taken from interviews conducted with Maggie Pinhorn, who helped to found the Basement Project and continues to run its film and video workshop.

How did the Basement begin?

MP : The idea grew up to meet some of the local demands. The idea of working with kids who have been or are likely to get into trouble and also working with those who are never likely to get into trouble. In other words rather than creating a ghetto situation having a kind of mix.

Once you get to know and talk to kids they have demands and they want to do things. They are bored. What teenager, of no matter what class or whoever their mum is, isn't bored? Then you have a whole lot of adults in the area wanting to do something for the kids — so you have an adults as well as a kids network. There is a constant demand for things to happen and be initiated in that community. You may have skills which people, if they need them, can use as a resource.

Where did the first demands come from?

MP: One of the very first came from a group of boys that a local detached youth worker, Dan Jones, didn't know what to do with. They had been visiting his house — which is just down the road — and had noticed all the books he has there. There are not a lot of books in other houses and flats on the estates round here and the group, made up of black and white teenagers, began to show an interest in them.

The books were subjects like the race issue and anti-apartheid which sparked off all sorts of discussions. Dan is not only a painter but is also very interested in films and eventually the group decided they would like to make a movie.

I had been doing some events for the Whitechapel Art Gallery which were not specifically «art» because they wanted something that would appeal to the local community. I had chosen to do things particularly aimed at kids so that through them I could get to meet the parents — that's a classic way of working.

Then Dan Jones arrived on the scene and said: «You're Maggie Pinhorn aren't you, can you come and make some movies?» He pushed me very hard so I came down to his house one day to meet the kids. I listened to what they wanted and it occurred to me that rather than me make a film about them, it would be far more interesting if they could do it themselves. I

had not thought through any philosophies of community art or anything else like that. I just thought they could write the story and demand the way it would look and so on. I talked to them and said what my idea of the best way of getting highest degree of involvement was.

How did you go about initiating the practical process?

MP: There were enormous problems of how we were going to raise the money. We sat down and put our heads together. We started writing out applications including one to the Rowntree Trust which is very concerned about multi-racial activities.

During this process I was also roped into helping out on the E1 Festival which was just getting off the ground. I began to go to those meetings and met a whole lot of adults. The Basement developed out of a need for somewhere to meet up for the groups. There was this space in the basement of the old Stepney Town Hall which had been the caretaker's flat, but he had moved out. All we first had were two rooms and since then we have expanded to the whole floor.

We arranged to have a weekly meeting for the film group on Wednesday evenings — and the film and video groups still meet on that day. We began to work out the idea. There were loads of really good arguments and there was the opportunity to have that kind of dialogue that isn't possible on a streetcorner or in a disco where you cannot hear anybody speak. The idea of actually communicating was beginning. That is really what I am most interested in — how people communicate. The tools I use are film and video.

What exactly was your background?

MP: When I left the Central School of Art, where I had trained to do theatre and television design, I was determined to work in the film industry, which I'd wanted to do ever since I was knee high. I was born in 1943.

Why did you want that?

MP: I just liked movies. We used to have them at home at kids' parties. My father used to like films and we had a whole collection and a cinema in the playroom. I can remember them very well — Felix The Cat, Tom Mix and so on. We never had television, but we did have these films. I started going to the cinema at a very early age, going to the Saturday morning pictures — but not that much because I lived in a village when I was very small and it was quite a long way to the nearest town. When I was a teenager, I missed school to go to the movies, because in those days there would be two programmes a week and there were two movie houses in the town. I would try

and get to see all four programmes in one week by sneaking off school early. When I left the Central School of Art, I got a job in the film industry which is very much a family business. I knew nobody in the industry, but just went into it cold.

How did you start working on events at the Whitechapel Art Gallery?

MP: That was because of what I felt was wrong with the film industry. On the one hand I liked it because it was good experience and also because of the discipline which is very hard. The bad things are the greed and the shallowness of films that are made. I ended up sitting round a table, saying to people: «What is this film about; why are we making this film as opposed to any other film. It breaks absolutely no new ground and is just a load of commercial shit.

During that time a great deal was going on in the world — the Vietnam war was happening; I lived in London in the Notting Hill area where a lot was going on. The whole flower power era was then. *Release* and *Time Out* were started, all in that area. We'd all began to move there when we were at college as it was so cheap. There was this whole thing about breaking through the media and the existing establishment being so detached from any kind of youth culture.

What specific direction did you take?

MP: I began to feel that I was working in an industry that was fascinating and I was beginning to earn more and more money, but what I was doing was very irrelevant to what was going on in the world. I didn't have any big political crisis, I just sensed that I didn't want to end up as yet another credit caption on an old movie showing on television in fifty years time. The job didn't have any sense of purpose.

What did you particularly become disillusioned with?

MP: The media seemed to me totally irrelevant to the vast majority of people in this country. It wasn't about them and it wasn't for them; it was, in fact, completely middle class oriented and dominated. There is a mass of people who still don't get heard and are not appreciated. It wasn't because I had read any vast tracts of Marx, it was just because I felt these injustices. I thought that the East End would be somewhere where I could do something. You know how coincidences happen — I thought it would be good to do something and somebody else wanted something done so we met together. That's really how this project with *Tunde's Film* started.

Details of Tunde's Film

Synopsis

Tunde's Film - not so much a story, more a way of life seen through the eyes of a group of teenagers living in London's East End.

A dance at a local club, a fight with the «Old Bill», arrest, bail. A meeting of friends in a cafe, arguments and friendship between black and white. The hunt for a job out of necessity rather than for fulfilment. Street life, a football match, a social worker trying to do his job. A police chase, on the run, boredom and frustration, depression, oppression. Plans for an armed raid on a bank next door to a police station, «to get their own back». Dreams of escape — trapped in reality.

Dinah's Cafe

(Title song. Words by Pam Nestor, music by Joan Armatrading)

The shadows of these high walls
and dusty streets surround my everyday.
Lost in million helpless ones,
left to decay.

But I'm gonna head for the bright side,
I intend to make my life pay,
so leave me alone just now in thought,
I'll meet you round the corner at Dinah's Cafe.

Trapped, trapped, that's all I hear them say
as they let the pain go by,
I'm not living to be tortured
this time it's do or die,
for I'd rather be a loser
than live a life of fear.
So if you like me feel desperate
tomorrow we'll reach out for a new life.

So meet me round the corner
at Dinah's Cafe.
I'm not sure if I'm brave but I know I'm ready.
Tomorrow, the start of a new way.
Trapped, trapped, that's all I hear them say,
as they let the chains go by.
I'm not living to be tortured,
tomorrow it's do or die.

Did you have much difficulty in raising the money for the film?

MP: All of it came from Rowntree. We started off before Christmas 1972 getting things together and in January 1973 we got the go ahead. By that time we had taken a great many photographs, colour and black and white, and we'd mounted these in a book to send off to Rowntree. So we made a really good presentation of the film — that is exactly how you had to do it in the film industry and I didn't see any reason not to do it for Tunde's Film. Anyway, it was a very enjoyable process, they'd achieved something and it was well done. I didn't do it, they did it working with me and so they were able to present themselves as well as anybody else can.

Did it surprise you that the kids did as well as they did?

MP: No, I was just pleased. Nothing surprised me. I think that everybody is capable if they are given the opportunity. There is no equal opportunity for expression or doing things, people just aren't taught, shown or encouraged. There is no education visually.

How much money was involved?

MP: We made the whole thing on £2000 with free film processing. I went round to see people I knew in Soho laboratories and asked if they could help. We had chosen to do a film in 16mm for very specific reasons. The kids wanted to make a good film, they kept saying to me: «Will it be a proper film? We don't want none of them wierdo films like that Warhol. We want a proper film like we go and see at the cinema.» I thought, okay, those are your terms of reference, and we'll go by them. The laboratories said that we could have the processing and the prints free of charge and I was absolutely amazed. That meant that we were able to do the film. At the same time I asked another person for the use of his cutting rooms, edge numbering and things like that. He said that we could use them in the evenings when everybody else had gone home. I found somebody else to help edit, I found a cameraman and more or less a whole crew.

All the money went on stock, technical equipment and so on. There was very minimal payment to the crew because they were interested in the work for its own sake. They came down, went to the kids' meetings and met the kids and got to know them. I think there is a growing namby-pamby area in community film making whereby people tend to ask «did people actually hold the camera themselves?» Though I think that it is extremely important that people learn to use those tools, they are not necessarily going to be terribly good at using them. Certainly not as good as somebody who has been

a technician for ten years. In the film industry there are directors and producers who use cameramen and there is absolutely no reason why the kids could not control a similar situation. I said that they could either make their film totally on their own, but even I am not a particularly good 16mm camera person and it would be very hard for them to operate one. I explained that they had the choice of either making a Super 8mm film totally by themselves or, if they wanted to make it on 16mm, then we would have to have a cameraman. So they said: «Right, Miss, we'll have a cameraman.» And I still think that there is no harm in working like that. You have just as much access, just as much control, but you happen to be using a technician. I have a tremendous respect for those technicians in the film industry because they really know what they are doing. They're the best part of the film industry. It is those people who don't have any particular skills or crafts who are the worrying element.

How did the actual production go?

MP: We filmed it in March 1973, in one week because we could only afford to hire all the equipment for that time. We set ourselves a schedule and organised many call sheets and time sheets. Then finally, one kid sat down to write the script and put it all together, and when that script was typed up and first presented to them, the kids were absolutely over the moon; they really felt proud of it. It meant that everybody had a copy of the script and then came the read through. There were a couple of kids going bright red at the idea of this read through and I was able to say quite openly: «Can't you read?» And they were able to say quite openly back: «No, I can't» So I said that was alright as we were going to read out loud anyway, and it was a very democratic thing. So they had a script whether they could read or write and they turned the page when anybody else did. Some of them have since learned to read — and that's important.

It was very exciting making the film, they adored it. It was also very funny because they would always turn up late. They'd ask what time you start when you actually work and I'd say eight o'clock. They'd say: «Oh, we're still in bed, man»; so I'd say: «O.K., what about ten o'clock?» By twelve o'clock everybody might turn up which meant that we had very long shooting days, shooting the film right the way through the day until eleven o'clock at night to get everything done because there were a great number of day shots and night shots all the way through.

The editing took us a long time; the person I found to edit was actually doing commercials at the time, but was very keen to do a film as well. The

kids would come up to the cutting room and sit around for hours. They got bored, but they also realised that if they wanted to have a say they had to be there. If they went away, Nick Lewin would carry on editing or I would leave my notes. Then the kids would come back and say: «Where's that bit on so and so? I want it back in.» So we'd have it back in and so it went on like that. Then there was the dubbing and everything else. The film was ready by about the end of July, 1973. It was a lot of work as you can imagine because we only had the evenings outside our own jobs.

When was the film first shown?

MP: We showed it in a youth club on the Berner Estate, Ponler Street. It was riotous, I had never been to a film show like it in my life. The atmosphere was fantastic. They sat down and made beautiful invitations. Then the kids went round the area and they gave everybody they knew an invitation as well as their mums and dads. Everybody had to bring bottles and they were stacked up at the back of the hall. I had sworn that the first people to ever see the film would be the kids and their families. Throughout the entire showing they shouted, yelled, roared with laughter. «There's my street, there's my house.» Everybody adored it but what was going to happen next? I knew that we could show it around here but I knew nothing about distribution.

More important was the very serious matter about the basic project itself and the idea that we had of running it as a community arts workshop and developing it, not only handling the film.

Did you have the Town Hall basement at this stage?

MP: We had the two rooms. Dan Jones was very keen to show this film to the youth service to improve our situation. Our ideas for what this place could be were riding on this project. There weren't any community arts workshops around anywhere in the country at that point. That's what we wanted to form so we thought our basic funding should come from the local authority and the youth service. The local authority owns the building and we wanted them and the youth service to approve the idea of the project. So we went to a youth committee meeting to show the film and took the kids with us. I had a feeling that we must not talk about community work, but let the kids say what they wanted to. The committee were knocked out. That's why it was essential that the film was good, that it was on 16mm, that it got out and about and people could see it and respect it as a product. The fact that I sent it off to the Edinburgh Festival was a bonus, an added flip. I made that into an idea; I was invited as a director so I wrote back and said:

«there are fifteen of us, can we come? They were freaked out, but I arranged a flat up there and got in touch with the social services in Edinburgh to lend us some mattresses. All the kids went to the film festival and the majority of them had never been away from home by themselves before. It was a very valuable experience for them especially as they were coming up to seventeen.

Were they all male?

MP: Yes, basically they were all male but they had girl-friends who are in the movie. Girl-friends would come in the room and stand in the corner and not touch the chairs or anything. Girls were definitely down there and boys were up here. It was very chauvinistic which is difficult to break down, although I have tried and am still trying. There is only so much I can lay down about how I feel about issues.

One of the criticisms levelled at Tunde's Film is that it was a very special instance with a relatively small group who literally came from obscurity to be taken up by the media. They went on to do an Open Door programme for the BBC and so on. Could it be said that you just take small groups rather than involve the general community?

MP: The group is part of the community. The support mechanisms on that project and the people that were around it — adventure playground workers, youth workers, community workers, social workers and all the members of the community who are involved in making the film; the adults and the parents; the fact that I was not just working with that group but also with the festival group; all these involvements show that we were not working in isolation at all at any stage of the game. We were all dependent on each other.

The Basement after Tunde's Film

How did the Basement develop after Tunde's Film?

MP: There was a demand for photography and silkscreen printing for which we had a worker. We also had Chris Searle, a teacher and writer who produced the anthology *Stepney Words*, who was a brave and individualistic person. He started a Basement writers group and was very interested in working with some of the kids he had taught at school who were now leaving. So again the whole idea of a community arts process was there — getting the group to express themselves and write their own poetry and stories. Then somebody came down called Peter Conway who started a drama group. We were also attached to the Half-Moon Theatre, trying to get them

to do drama groups but actually that never worked out because of various problems. So at the beginning there were the workshops. Every single one of them was based on a demand, we even had a painters group at one time, but then we found it very difficult to get someone to run that.

Each group forms itself and is never like a class. If there is another group who wants to do the same thing then we will run another session for them. And you are working with groups of friends. It is always a group activity on a very democratic basis, therefore very non-authoritarian and you have to be able to do it. Then we began to develop the other things that go on here — camping, riding, canoeing and contacts with other community organisations.

Would you describe the Basement as an organic body?

MP: Very much so; not just x-number of things from Monday to Friday or at weekends but workshops that are wound down when demand falls off. We've always done music from the point of view of local groups who want to come and practice and rehearse and just talk to people about music. It's not so much of a tutorial process.

What about the financial structure of the Basement?

MP: Well, we've got a building that the local authority gives us. We have access to this whole basement. They pay for the heat, the light, the rent, the telephone, all the back-up facilities. Then there are workers like me who are paid part-time through the ILEA Youth Service as part-time tutors and we have x-number of sessions allocated to pay those people.

That would be similar for any other workshops?

MP: Yes, then you have the social services input which is the community work side. Dan Jones is also paid by the social services as a detached youth worker.

How many workers do you have?

MP: It varies. An assistant social worker who comes from the area social work team, whose offices are upstairs, has been seconded to this project downstairs. We have a detached youth worker, who is Dan Jones. Now because of what this project was it attracted a lot of kids who should have been at school, but we could not take them because we have to be very careful not to be a hideaway for truants. So we decided that the best thing to do was set up an intermediate education centre. That is an alternative form of education, totally within the system. It means we have two teachers. That is the nature of the team: teachers, social workers, community workers and

community artists. There is every kind and type of worker — and the local community. A great number of local mums and dads come down here to work with the kids. It is a place for meetings and arranging events. Currently the Tower Hamlets community transport network is being coordinated from here.

The Basement gives back-up to community festivals, by providing facilities for printing posters and T-shirts. Anyone can walk in and say they want to do a poster.

What is the actual decision making structure?

MP: A weekly team meeting between all those various workers here.

Do any of the kids go to it?

MP: Formally, no; but informally they are around because it's on a Friday and they are not supposed to be in here on a Friday but as it turns out they like it so much that they come then as well.

Some of the workers are responsible to the local Council, some to the ILEA and so on. Does that work out well?

MP: Well, on the one hand, it causes enormous freedom because the Bureaucracy's problem is what is the Basement. The Basement does not fall into any category that they have on their books. This is their problem, not ours, but it is ours from the point of view of getting resources. We didn't want to fill in bits of paper because we didn't want to be pinned down. Once you get into that bureaucracy and writing sheets of paper about what you are and who you are, you have a problem. But usually if you don't fill in the correct bits of paper you don't get the money.

MP: Yes

But usually if you don't fill in the correct bits of paper you don't get the money.

MP: Yes, that's true but we have a petty cash flow from upstairs from social services. The school of course is funded through the ILEA — very minimally I might add.

It has come to a crunch this year and we have worked jointly on a paper to explain our position. That we have a national reputation and they should jolly well recognise it and take the kudos for it. We could be a vast, enormous project. We could have built an empire by now, but we chose deliberately not to. This is always a very small base. Our work is mostly done when we leave the base and go into the community. A lot of people who

concentrate heavily on their building have a very building-bound project, worrying constantly about the building and whether it's leaking. We trust each other about the way we run our own bit. We are all of us highly individualistic people who find it very hard to work cooperatively and who admit that openly to each other with a sense of humour. Because of that it works, we do work as a team funnily enough. We worked for weeks and months not seeing each other properly before, so we decided that we must have a weekly meeting which is a discipline which is very hard for us to keep to, in fact. If you are actually working sensitively at the beck and call of the community then it's important that you are approachable and around at any given time.

How many people would come here in the average week?

MP: Every form we ever get to fill in asks us that question. On average I would say possibly 200 people a week of every size, shape, and colour. That does not sound too many, but you must remember that for every one of those there will probably be ten or so more whom you meet outside every week.

With your knowledge of the wider community arts scene do you think that this place is unique?

MP: People work down here because they have imaginations. You have to want to work down here because it is a very tough way of working. There are no concessions, it is all out or nothing. You have to be totally committed to it and so in a way it is unique. It took me years to understand the social services and intermediate treatment and I still have not understood it completely. The hierarchy is a fantastically appalling aspect of it.

Using film and video

Can we look at the film and video activity?

MP: Having done one 16mm film and one television production there was no way on which we could go on at that level. We needed to do more low-key activities to consolidate what had been achieved. We had made a big splash and had to settle down.

The first thing I did was apply to the Rowntree Trust again. The kids had seen video equipment used at the E.I. Festival by a group who came down later to let the kids have a go with it. I had been thinking at the back of my

mind that if we were going to last out, the only way was to use super 8 and video because they were cheaper.

Had you any experience of video?

MP: No, but I knew about it. I'd seen Inter-Action and Action Space at work with it. Various other friends working in the community theatre were developing video projects and I saw them. Then we asked Inter-Action to come down to the festival with their media van and all the kids spent most of their day there. Dan Jones thought the idea of video was horrible because he can't stand television. I argued that it was a very important area, although at that time there were only a few video projects. So we got the money from Rowntree and bought the video equipment — a Sony portapack, an edit deck and monitors. We've still got the portapack, which is absolutely on its last legs. For film we have a couple of super 8 cameras and associated equipment. It's pretty minimal.

How did film and video work together?

MP: At the same time as applying for video in 1974, we had applied a little earlier to the Greater London Arts Association (GLAA) for super 8 cameras and projector, which we received just before we got the video. By that time the original film group were beginning to go off, get married, get jobs and new groups were starting to come in.

I've always worked with groups in sessions down here, a girls' group, mostly black girls and a boys' group. We care about our relationship with the local schools and I went to work for two terms in a secondary modern boys school for two days a week. I was invited there by an English teacher to work with a group of ROSLA kids (in the first year a group had to stay on until their sixteenth birthdays after the Raising of the School Leaving Age). I showed them Tunde's Film and asked if they'd like to do something similar. I didn't think that there was very much response, but then, in the staff room afterwards, three of the boys came and knocked on the door and said they'd thought about it and wanted to make a film.

I also started working with a group of black girls whom Dan Jones had met. He had been in a Tower Hamlets girls' school showing Tunde's Film and some girls had said that they wanted to make a film. They came down and have now been around for a long time.

Can you generalise about the subject matter and choice of topics that come up for films?

MP: Reality is the most important feature. Then to fantasise on that reality. What might be and what could happen. Everything is bound totally within people's own terms of reference. The streets they live in, the flats they inhabit, those are their stories. The stories happen totally within their environment. With the girls there is a high value placed on romance; that comes from their own lives and the sort of books they read. But it's not a wishy-washy type of romance, it's an aggressive type of romance. They're very much into boy/girl relationships. The boys are into adventures — anything from bunking off school to nicking something, and running away. It's important that those ideas are expressed in terms of stories. If they were documentaries they would be extremely dull. Even though they are real life to them, they are stories.

Others might argue that fiction is alright, but there should also be signs of their real social environment.

MP: I would accept that. I think it is an interesting view but would say that I am in the business of building up people's confidence in order that they can express themselves creatively and use their imaginations. That is possibly the most political act that you can be doing. That is more political than any critique or analysis of the environment. What I can see as a result of people having been involved in that kind of work is that they are not going to do it in terms of film or video or anything else, but in their personal lives. So you might build up somebody's confidence enough for them to complain about their housing conditions. To go along and demand a decent flat to live in. To get a job, to think and to write more, to do whatever else for themselves to improve their own personal quality of life. To help themselves rather than have others do it for them. To stop depending on the establishment system and to get on with it. To articulate, to say what they want, what they think and feel.

To me, if it was just making movies then there would be no point in that. I could do that any time — as a pass-time. That is not what I am doing. You have a whole thing to conquer about concentration apart from anything else. How long can somebody concentrate? The group I have been working with today at first were able to concentrate for about one hour. We have now got to the point where they can maintain it for a whole day. I'm not patronising, I'm not saying: isn't that good. What I am saying is that there is progress in their terms, real progress.

Surely you wouldn't draw a very great distinction between video and film for that sort of activity?

MP: The distinction is technical. Right from the beginning I worked a different way with video. I think that people were expecting me to scream

around the area doing video tapes rather like Inter-Action. I didn't feel that I could cope with that, nor that it was the right thing to do. So we had this equipment and we spread the word. I learnt very quickly how to use it — literally the day before everybody else. The groups that were working with me on film also began to use video. Other groups in the Basement also began using it, and so did the local school. Then other projects in the Borough began to use video, the Family Service Unit, the adventure playground, Avenues Unlimited, hundreds and hundreds of groups. They would come down and learn how to use it and take it away with them. That way it's been all over the Borough and everyone uses it differently.

That's using video as a community resource. How have you used it at the Basement Film and Video Workshop?

MP: We have made remarkably creative pieces of video. I'm interested in being able to make something and then playing it back immediately. To use it to create a dialogue. Talking at it and with it. Using it in a confined space. A group of girls would sit down and say: «right, we are going to play this week». That idea could be carried out there and then. The story would be made up on the spot and it would be done totally within this room.

The discipline of never having a tripod; the camera angles some groups managed to get, the ideas of not even editing the tapes, going straight through from one scene using click on and off editing to get the immediacy of it as opposed to film which is a longer term process. I think the immediacy of video is its strongest attribute and I think the time lapse mechanism is much more to do with film. People go off and make video tapes and spend hours editing them, that's a tremendous thing to do, but still the quality will never be the same as film. I know people will argue that it is as good, and it can be if you've got the time. I just prefer to spend the time on film. I have been in meetings which were extraordinary where video people were on one side and film people on the other, both sides arguing with each other. Then I've been picked on right in the middle and they say: «but you've used both video and film, how come you don't have this conflict? I just see them as two different types of media and I happen to use them differently and they happen to complement each other.

The future

Which is the direction that the Basement is going in?

MP: The film and video will progress depending on the demand. For the Basement as a whole what we are trying now is a new experiment, forced on us because of the lack of resources and because we do not wish to be an an-

nually granted body. We would not like to depend on the Arts Council for our existence and no community arts project should. It is right that the Arts Council should give money to community arts, but the annual review of grants is too breath-taking — especially when those on the committee may have no personal knowledge of your project at all. If we had to worry every year about whether we were going to be able to continue we couldn't do our job properly.

We do have areas of support, but over the years we've found that the social services area team, whose offices are on the floor above, have become more and more interested in our way of working. They are not one of those traditional hide-bound teams but are very imaginative because they have to cope with extremely bad problems. They have found that traditional social work methods increasingly do not work, but that our approach is more successful. We are working with kids who are on their books and getting things out of them that the social services never can. Why? Because a kid's initiative is being used, his imagination is being used, he's having a warm and loving atmosphere in which to work. The social services said they would like to come down here more to find out about our methods. Now we have liaison between the two floors. We have said that we are interested in becoming part of the social services team. In fact our options are: going totally independent, continuing as we are, or becoming part of the social services. We have chosen the third option. So we sat down and for the first time in our lives we wrote a paper in which we are trying to persuade the local authority and social services hierarchy to accept our proposal. At the moment the social services upstairs have an intake team and a long term team. We are saying: how about having a youth and community work team of which the Basement is part. We are not doing it for salaries but for resources.

If you like we are working within the system to change it. A lot of people may not like that idea, but we intend to survive and and it does not mean that we accept everything that is handed down to us, because we don't. We fight, we hit back and we say: no, why don't you learn from us as well as us learning from you.

Note:

Since this interview took place the social workers and community workers in Tower Hamlets went on strike for nearly a year protesting against cuts and poor wage levels. During that time the teaching and community arts activities were maintained and even developed. Now that our whole team is

back together again we have decided to keep our existing structure and support mechanisms and not become wholly part of the Social Services where even more cuts are threatened. We are also forming an independent community arts trust to raise funds which we hope will safeguard our future during this period of economic decline and government cut-backs. We intend to survive! (M.P. 1980)

Summing up

Could you sum up?

MP: I'm a media lady. I have found that over the time that I have worked here people have had the confidence to look at and use media for themselves and that is what I am extremely pleased about. So you get the idea of doing publicity for a festival and find people will talk to the newspapers. You encourage that to happen. They will produce their own newspapers and you encourage that to happen. The radio wants to interview people, they will talk to those people and be interviewed on the radio. These people here now have the confidence to do that because it is so easy to get publicity once you know how, but nobody tells people how. We have made straight television programmes, participated in them, made whole tracts of those programmes. We always say when TV people come that we want to know what they are going to do. We want to look at it afterwards and so on. I can hardly count the number of programmes that we have made for the ordinary mass media such as London Weekend Television, Thames Television and the BBC. I think that out of having a little film and video project based here, that kind of approach has happened. More local people get seen and heard on the mass media and they have the confidence to do it now. It is a very small thing and it may not be masses of people, but it is very important indeed to those who do it.

List of research material

- Details of the Basement. Issued by the Basement, 1978.
- Tunde's Film, by the Basement Project Film Group. Leaflet issued by the Film Group, 1973.
- Interviews with Maggie Pinhorn, 1978.
- Animation Projects in the UK, by Frances Berrigan, 1977. Published by the National Youth Bureau, UK.

Maggie Pinhorn: «Reality is the most important feature. Then to fantasise on that reality. What might be and what could happen. Everything is bound totally within people's own terms of reference. The streets they live in, the flats they inhabit, those are their stories. The stories happen totally within their environment.»





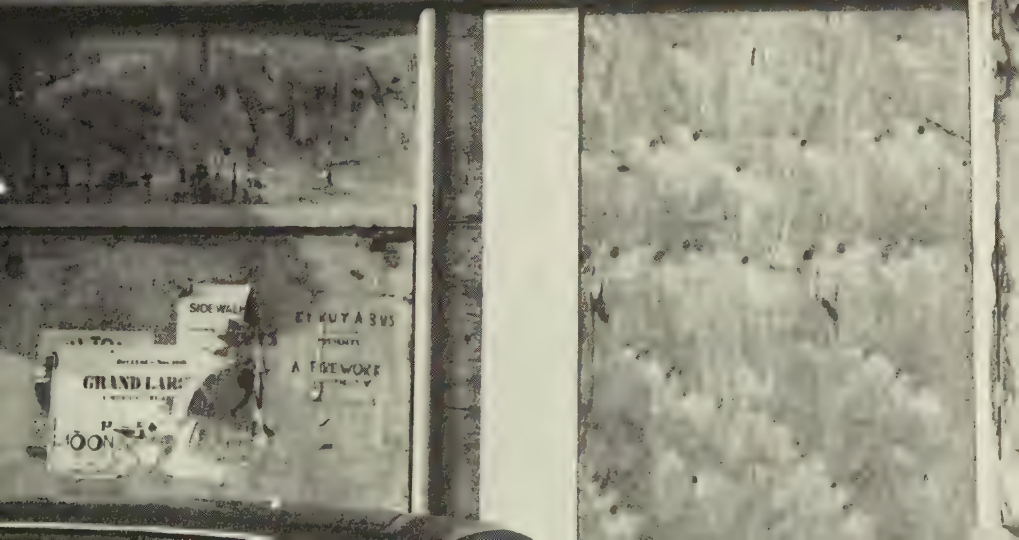


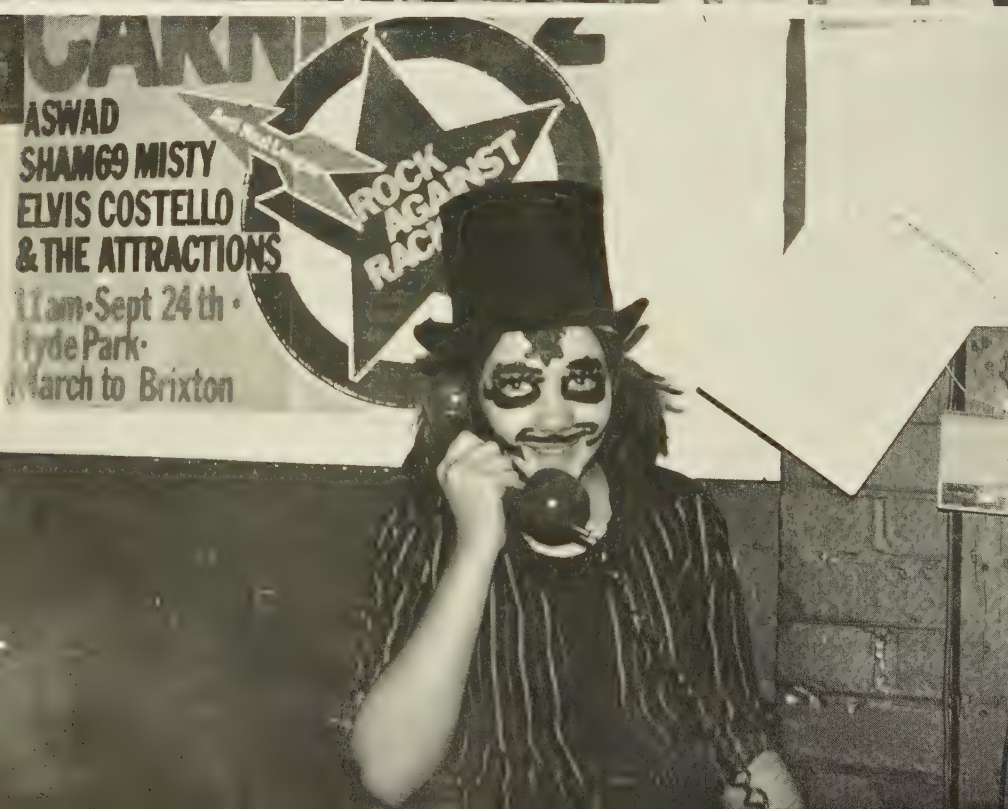
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FILM '78



The Blackfriars Photography Project

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From Photojournalism to community photography

Paul Carter, founder of the project: «I was living locally and trying to get into freelance photojournalism. But I was becoming more unhappy with trying to photograph social and political events and attempting to get them published through the mass or alternative media. It was all part of consumerism. The way photojournalistic work and written articles were presented usually did not help people act. I wanted to find out if there was some way of possibly using photography closer to groups where some kind of action was being organised. Because the mass media do not organise action. And because I knew nothing about social action, I decided to team up with some kind of group. And it just happened that the *Blackfriars Settlement* in South London was the nearest to where I used to live.»

The Blackfriars Settlement is a multi-purpose social action agency with three bases in the area of north Southwark and Waterloo¹. It serves a population of 20,000. Like the Albany and other settlements it is the product of liberal, middle-class concern for the plight of the working-classes which reached a peak in the late nineteenth century. Since 1965 Blackfriars Settlement's philosophy has been overhauled, drawing it away from the individual casework approach and more towards concepts of community action, where people are encouraged to act for themselves to improve conditions rather than have help funnelled in from outside.

An information and advice centre together with a free legal advice service were established as well as several community work projects in order to encourage the formation of autonomous self-help groups fighting for better local facilities. The other major area of Blackfriars Settlement's work concentrates on building up firmer social structures in the community. It organises youthwork projects (clubs, intermediate treatment and adventure playgrounds), a neighbourhood scheme, clubs for the elderly, lonely and blind, meeting places for mothers with young children, an adult literacy project, a work centre for the physically handicapped and a student unit for those on placement from social and community work courses. The Settlement employs 25 workers, has dozens of volunteers and controls an annual budget of £200,000 (for 1976/77). Two-thirds of this money comes from local authorities and the rest from different charities.

Paul Carter: «So I first came to the Blackfriars Settlement in 1973 for a look around. At that time I felt the workers there just needed cheap photographs for fund-raising — and I offered them at cost price. I also volunteered my time and began to take photographs of the various ac-

tivities going on. Then I realised that people were getting a stack of photographs, but visually speaking they were relatively illiterate. They just were not using the photographs in their file to their full potential. So I realised there were two jobs involved: producing photographs and teaching people how to use them in this kind of context. Their cultural view of photography related either to taking holiday snapshots themselves or to the type practised by outside professionals. They just did not make the right kind of connections.»

Setting up an experiment

So Paul Carter applied for a number of grants and finally received a small one from the Arts Council and a larger one, in the form of a bursary, from Kodak. The aim of the one-year experimental project was to investigate how photography could be used in community development. In the beginning Paul saw himself as a service photographer; as a person who was going to do a large number of photographs for the eleven different groups working at the Settlement and in the community so that people would be better informed on what was happening around them.

Paul Carter was always aware that such activities might disappear as quickly as they came if the photographer that started them decided to pull out. To try to overcome this he established one of his earliest priorities, which was to set up a darkroom with high accessibility, where people could learn the processes of photography themselves. In 1974, Paul Carter went on an Easter holiday with 150 kids from the Settlement and some youthworkers. During their stay Paul helped some of the kids take photographs with Polaroids, and as they seemed to enjoy it so much he suggested that they look him up after they returned to London if they wanted to learn more about the subject.

At first only a few youngsters trickled into the Settlement for an evening session of photography, but as news of them spread, soon there were enough students to justify groups on four nights a week. Eventually adults began to come. Crash courses for community workers and interested activists were organised and later a pensioners photography group emerged. Gradually the teaching programmes of the project came to assume greater importance than the photographic documentation of the Settlement's other activities — although this still continued. Four years on, the photo workshops are the seed bed for the long term development of a self-sufficient community photography culture in Blackfriars.

Another element of the project has been its ability to throw up new ideas of how photography can be used as an aid to community action. Several tape-slide shows have been produced and proved this medium to be effective in visually assisting a variety of different campaigns.

Fortunately, Paul Carter managed to draw out enough support for his unique experiment². In mid-1976 Caro Webb became the second project worker, after having worked as a volunteer with the kids photography group since October 1975.

Caro Webb: «Originally I did a degree in social sciences, which finished in 1973. I did a number of jobs, teaching for a while in a girls' secondary school, working with pensioners in North Kensington and on a playscheme in the summer. I learned photography from a friend who had a darkroom. I started to take pictures almost immediately for pensioners organisations, youth clubs and playgroups.»

At the end of 1977 when Paul Carter finally left, Caro Webb took over full responsibility for the running of the Blackfriars Photography Project. Paul Carter was replaced by a new worker, guaranteeing the project's continuity.

The Youth Photography Programme

«The aim of the youth photography programme is to teach photography to young people in a small group setting and to encourage them to find ways of using their new skill to their own and, if they have the interest, to the community's benefit. Learning to be part of the group and to share information, skills, facilities, equipment and the responsibilities of making the project work are as important as the learning to do and use photography.

«The kids who come are aged ten to eighteen. They mainly live on one of four housing estates, all within five minutes' walk of the Settlement. They are all from working class homes. About one-third of the members are black or Asian. The area they live in has very few facilities for them.» (From *The Youth Photography Programme*, Blackfriars).

Each evening session is about three-and-a-half hours long and is run by the two coordinators. One or the other of them is on duty two nights a week, but the bulk of the work is actually carried out by volunteer teachers. They try to maintain a teaching ratio of three kids to each adult. On three nights a week there are closed groups, which stay together until a member drops out for one reason or another, making place for a new person. On Wednesday

nights — the so-called Open Night — anyone from the other groups or from outside can come in and do whatever work she or he wants. At first they usually take photographs of their families and friends, and later some undertake more specific projects about themselves or the community.

For example, in August, 1977, the following work was taking place:

- *On Monday night* there were two kids who had just started. One, a ten-year-old girl, was very keen on dogs, so she made pictures on that theme. The other, a boy, had been taking pictures of skateboarders because that interested him at the time.
- *On Tuesday night* another youngster, Clive, was making a tape slide show about how a photograph is produced. He did it mainly to learn how to produce such a show and intended to exhibit it at some youth clubs. Robbie, a seventeen-year-old, wanted to help the nursery of a local Polytechnic in its struggle for financial survival. Together with one of the older teenagers from another group he took a number of photographs at the nursery. Finally, they made thirty large prints to be used within the context of the nursery's fund-raising campaign. Other members of the Tuesday group were producing prints of photographs taken on a number of outings to the countryside. They intended to make displays for a comparison of life in the country and the city.
- *On Wednesday Open Night* two boys were developing and printing their photos for a nearby young people's theatre group, which they had recently joined. Both of them used to be members of the Blackfriars Photography Project, and this example shows how skills developed in one field can be applied to another. Most of Wednesday nights were like that. Some of the participants used to come only occasionally and there were some from the regular nights who had something special on, or who were just very enthusiastic to have a project finished.
- Finally, *on Thursday night* one of the girls was producing a tape slide show. She was using colour slides to go with the pop song «Money, money, money» by Abba. The pictures were taken around the West End of London and her neighbourhood in North Southwark. Another girl was particularly interested in music and was working hard to improve her photography of pop concerts. Someone else was producing pictures as part of an account of her nursery training. Her written report on one child was thoroughly documented with photographs.

When the kids were asked by Paul what doing photography meant to them, the following conversation took place:

Paul: What do you do with your photographs?

Teresa: Well, when I go in I show them to my mum and dad and see what they think of them. They usually think they are quite good, and then I put them in my box and sometimes I take them to school and show me mates. Because sometimes they're interested in what I take. Then often I just show anyone who's around.

Paul: Do you think that most people could learn the basics of photography and be better photographers than they are?

Robbie: Oh yeh, anyone could. My mum's even learned things what I've said. My sister takes horrible photographs, and I told her. She's getting better. She used to take silly pictures. She'd take a picture of a person. She'd only do the head and the rest was all ceiling, and she thought that was a good picture. It would have looked twice as good if you had all of her in. Up closer and less of the wall. So people learn.

Paul: You don't have to be especially «intelligent» to do photography?

Robbie: If you want to be really good, I suppose you have to be. I don't know really. Well, what is photography? It's not measuring things, so you don't have to be good at maths. You have to be good at spotting things. If you are quite a dull person who don't spot anything, you know, don't see much in pictures, then you can't do it because you're not really interested.

Paul: Do you look and notice things a bit more generally?

Teresa: Yeah, I do. Because before you didn't take no notice of things but when you are in photography you sort of look out for things you might take. You know, when you're walking around it's more interesting to look at things, because you want to take them.

(Paul Carter interviewing the Blackfriars Young Photography Group. From *Doing Photography*. Camerawork No 2, April/May 1976).

From time to time kids photographs are mounted for display in the Settlement or other local venues. The Waterloo Festival, a pub, a fundraising fair, and a shoe repair shop are some of the places where the kids photographs have been shown to the local people.

A large exhibition of the kids' work was put together by them and Paul Carter in 1976. *Doing Photography* was first shown in the neighbourhood and then went to the Half Moon Photography Gallery in East London. It has since toured more than a dozen locations in and out of the capital. The exhibition includes the work of 26 young photographers.

Project work: The kids are asked to contribute their skills to other groups in the neighbourhood

Clearly, there is a danger of concentrating too much on the personal development aspect of photography, especially in the way more traditional amateur photo clubs tend to overstress the technical and purely aesthetic side of taking pictures. So the project coordinators are encouraging the kids to contribute their skills as far as they can to other groups in their neighbourhood. They have done assignments for the Community Health Council, Settlement Youth Work, Waterloo Adventure Playground, SE1 Community Newspaper, Southwark Trades Council Nursery Campaign, pensioners clubs, Waterloo Festival, and a campaign for new housing in the area.

It is through such projects that the kids develop a sense of self-confidence and self-esteem. Trying to get kids to do project work of this sort is not easy for a number of reasons. However it remains an important goal of doing photography with kids.

The volunteer teachers

The volunteers form the backbone of the workshops. Selecting them and devising practical teaching methods therefore take up a good part of the coordinators' time. Up to 11 volunteers work on the project at any one time and they tend to come from a variety of backgrounds. Their role is described in this extract from The Youth Photography Programme written by the Blackfriars Settlement: «There are all kinds of people involved: photographers, a milkman, an editorial assistant, ex-photography students on the dole, teachers. These people have been recruited through advertisements in *Time Out* magazine and by people who work at the Settlement telling friends about the group.

«Experience in photography is most essential because even the kids who are just starting soon pick out anyone who is not too confident with the medium, often lose respect for that person and give him or her a hard time. A good interest in kids is needed because it is the kids and not photography which are the centre of the project. This cuts out a lot of people who are mad-keen to simply further photography for photography's sake.

«Each volunteer works one night each week. Ideally, volunteers are also expected to do something on the occasional weekend with their groups and to give an extra night or a Saturday afternoon every six or seven weeks for training sessions.

These training sessions are still embryonic. The volunteers have varying degrees of knowledge and experience in photography and working with kids, so getting them all together provides an opportunity for spreading the collected knowledge among the group around a little. Also the whole question of the aims and methods of the youth photography programme need regular discussion by the volunteers.»

Photography with pensioners

In early 1977 the photography project decided to offer the opportunity of learning photography to pensioners. Having advertised in several local pensioners clubs six people showed interest and started to come to the Project one morning a week. In the event this group ran for about six months with three committed members and four others who started but did not maintain their interest for very long. Like the youth project members these older people began by taking very personal pictures. They were then encouraged to make some practical use of their new skills.

Caro Webb: «Their main achievement in this respect was to produce photographs for a local day centre for elderly. The premises of the day centre were cramped and inadequate for its needs. The pensioners photography group were asked to take pictures showing these conditions. The photographs were then used by the Day Centre in their campaign to get better premises from the local authority.

«The group gradually wound down and ceased as we found more and more pressure on our time from other project commitments. Also it suffered from a certain lack of direction. It was not sufficient to hope that pensioners could become community photographers simply by learning the practicalities of photography and doing a few projects. This aim had to be incorporated into the teaching much more explicitly.»

Crash courses for adults

Blackfriars Photography Project offers a regular two-day a month training session for people who are connected with any of the community groups in the area. These crash courses in basic photographic skills are attended by six people per month and have so far turned out some impressive results. Two-and-a-half years ago Paul Carter trained some people who now form a photography group of four, working for the community newspaper. They are completely self-sufficient, coming in at the weekends to produce pho-

tographs needed by the paper. A playleader, who had been trained in this way, was doing photography very successfully on a local playground. Many of the Settlement workers are now capable of using photography within their particular jobs.

Out of Blackfriars' training experience one important lesson is to be learned. It is essential to develop the crash courses in such a way that the communication aspects of photography are given as much attention as the technical skills. As mentioned earlier, people who are taking part in the courses bring with them a simplistic and limited view of photography. They have to learn how even the most basic photography skills can be turned to any number of practical uses in the community context.

Action photography

The basic aim of Blackfriars' Photography Project is to develop photography as a tool for social and political action. Through the teaching workshops and the photographic work of the coordinators themselves this aim has been put into practice with various degrees of success. So far action photography has involved the production of tape-slide shows, street exhibitions, supplying local campaigns with photographs, and helping groups that needed photographic images. This sort of work has specifically contributed to

- a) increasing community awareness,
- b) assisting group formation and group development, and
- c) providing evidence.

Community awareness

Local people are badly informed about what is happening on their doorstep. The Photography Project tries to increase the level of information among local people about their area by producing photo displays illustrating certain issues. Photo displays have been put up in a community centre and on streets outside of it. In conjunction with the Community Action Team, displays about redevelopment were produced and taken into housing estates on the side of a van. A megaphone was used to encourage people to come down, look at the photographs, and get involved in discussions. In such situations pictures are secondary in so far as they are no more than the original point of contact from which discussions and further action spin off.

Group formation and group development

The Photography Project produced a tape-slide show to help the Blackfriars Peabody Tenants to form themselves into a tenants association. Together with some residents Paul Carter spent a weekend talking to people in the flats and in the local pub about living on the estate. Photographs were taken of the people interviewed and of the things they talked about. The edited tape-slide show expressed a variety of views about the estate. The process of making the tape-slide show (interviewing and photographing) helped bring people to the first meeting out of interest and curiosity. At the meeting the final product generated discussion and a sense of solidarity and purpose among the tenants.

Once a community group is formed it often happens that the activities fall off after a while or become stagnant. The Photography Project has discovered that photography can bring new stimulus to an already existing community group. An example of this type of action photography is a tape-slide show which was made with tenants from another local estate. The tape-slide show helped to bring renewed vigour to the tenants concerned.

Evidence

Photographs showing bad housing conditions, sites of personal accidents and other situations are often needed for use in claims, appeals and pressure campaigns. They are used in courts, tribunals, or are sent to the local Council or newspapers.

The Tanswell Estate Tape-Slide Show

An example of one particular tape-slide show made with tenants from a local estate, demonstrates some of the methods involved in action photography.

The Tanswell Estate Tenants Association, known as Tanswell Action Group had a lot of grievances about deplorable conditions in many of the flats and on the estate as a whole. A Greater London Council (GLC) estate, built in 1938, Tanswell Estate has problems common to many other similar estates throughout London. These problems are to do with such things as damp, outstanding repairs, lack of caretakers, unauthorised car parking and so on.

After months of trying to get improvements in the management and maintenance of the estate, the tenants' Action Group decided to call a public meeting between the GLC Housing officials and the tenants in order to express

their grievances. A community worker in touch with them suggested that a tape-slide show could be a useful way of expressing and demonstrating the problems to the officials. Tanswell Action Group picked up the idea and Caro Webb started to work with them.

The first stage of producing the tape-slide was to discuss and clarify exactly which issues were to be presented in this form — some were excluded because they could be best dealt with in other ways. Having drawn up a list of the problems, the Action Group set about researching which tenants on the estate would be prepared to give interviews about specific points eg. damp in the flats or outstanding repairs. Then, having learned the basics of interviewing and using a tape-recorder, some of them went on to collect interviews while Caro and another photographer (Tony Sleep) took most of the slide photographs.

The commentary script was put together while all the material was being collected and then revised as editing got under way. Narrated by two of the tenants, the commentary served to introduce sections of the tape-slide and to make points that were not made in the interviews.

Finally, just in time, the show was completed. It was presented at the start of the meeting, to a room filled with people from the estate and GLC officials. Visually displaying the conditions of many flats, the tape-slide confronted the officials with the range of problems needing urgent attention and action. It also allowed tenants who might not otherwise have spoken at a public meeting to express themselves clearly and strongly via the tape-recorded interview. The Housing Officials were very impressed and in the meeting that followed, agreed to several of the tenants' demands or opened the way to further negotiation subsequently. As tenants left the meeting at the end, there was an air of satisfaction that at last *some* of their grievances had been seen and heard and improvements might follow.

The Photography Project co-ordinators pointed out some of the specific advantages they see in using the tape-slide method: «We realised that using colour was important because you could show the conditions much more effectively than in black and white it brought them to life. The images being still mean that the viewer can dwell on and absorb the information in the pictures. The image can be projected to a larger size on a screen which also lends impact and enables easy «consumption» of the visual information. And if anyone wants to publish a print, it is easy to make a black and white one from a slide, so you can convert the tape-slide into an exhibition or publish pictures from it in a leaflet or whatever. Tape-slide is an accessi-

ble and flexible communication medium — even if people don't take their own pictures, they can have a great deal of control over the production and content of their tape-slide show.»

The Tanswell Estate tape-slide show has not been used just that once. Since then, it has been shown to several other tenants' groups in other parts of London to give them an idea of what is possible and to encourage them to make their own.

Management and administration

Up until recently all decisions — small and major — have been made by the two coordinators. But then the whole Settlement underwent an important change in its management structure in order to democratise and streamline its decision-making processes. The Photography Project, like the other projects, was required to form a management committee, but was free to organise the committee in the way it wanted. The committee of the Photography Project now consists of four young members and four adult volunteers from the youth photography programme, a representative from the pensioners' photography club, two representatives from Settlement community work- and youthwork projects (in order to draw from their experience), a Settlement Council member and the two project coordinators.

It has been very difficult to involve the kids and let them take on responsibilities. Paul Carter: «Caro and I have to learn to stop making decisions by ourselves and say — no, we have to put this to the committee. And the kids find it very difficult to follow the discussions and the decisions and they also feel quite inhibited with ten adults to the four of them. Most of the adults are middle class who generally have more confidence about speaking in that kind of situation. In that respect, it has not worked out too well; but it has raised people's expectations so they now want to be involved in decision-making processes.»

Since then the committee structure has been slightly reorganised. Each kids' evening group formed its own sub-committee, which meets once a month and elects the four young representatives for the committee. The kids say that this way they feel more able to speak out and form their own opinions. Though the project committee could function more smoothly, the coordinators find it much better to have everyone involved and have a check on them. They believe that the decisions being made are better because they become more realistic.

An element in management the coordinators feel is often under pressure is the administrative chores associated with running a community darkroom. These cover stocktaking, caretaking, cleaning, secretarial work and last, but not least, fundraising. Bringing attention to debit and keeping the system turning over smoothly enables the project to handle the many demands placed on it by the community. Although the Blackfriars Photography Project has never until recently had enough money coming in to plan two or three years ahead, there were at least sufficient grants from different sources to keep the project going at a minimum level of existence. Even to keep up minimal standards, extensive fundraising is necessary. This is a very time-consuming activity which often becomes a heavy burden for any group trying to break new ground in an unknown area like community communications. Paul Carter and Caro Webb have been very successful fundraisers producing informative pamphlets which provide the necessary material for applications and publicity campaigns.

Discussion

Four years of intensive experimenting has not just resulted in a number of new services and projects relating to the needs of the Waterloo community, but has brought forward a set of aims and methods defining and structuring community photography as a new innovative approach towards community communication. The Blackfriars Photography Project proves that it is quite possible to use the potential of photography in a systematic way to contribute visual support to community action and to stimulate community awareness through individual project work, group formation and group development processes. However, the complex nature of how aims and methods of community photography interrelate with one another poses a number of problems worth further examination.

Creative personal development – community photography as just another leisure activity?

Question (Q.): The largest single aspect of the project concentrates on teaching photographic skills to kids and adults. The coordinators believe that people taking pictures about their immediate surroundings generates creative personal development. Is there a danger that community photography at that stage is becoming another hobby-type leisure activity among others? Should not the setting up of a community darkroom fully concentrate on the more social and political aspects of a deprived community like Waterloo?

Paul Carter (PC.): A way you can get around this problem is by advertising your community darkroom as a place where people can learn photography *and* use it within the community.

Q.: But wouldn't there be an advantage in limiting the use of a community darkroom to those people who want to get on with applying photography as a tool for social action?

PC.: The thing is that there are not really so many people who are involved in community issues and at the same time show interest in working intensively with photography. One of the possibilities about photography is that you can reach another group of people who through their personal interest in photography might become involved with their community in a wider sense.

Q.: How often does this happen?

PC.: Quite frequently. Nearly all kids started photography out of self-interest and later contributed all kinds of things to the community. The same with the pensioners and many of the adults who we have taught. Perhaps it could be improved by structuring a bit more, by making it easier for people to step in and do assignments. But you've got to be very careful the way you present yourself. You've got to respect people's existing cultural view of themselves and their cultural expectation of photography. They consider it as something that you do for yourself — you take your instamatic on holiday and it is very personal, and you usually only show the photographs in a very personal way. Well, I'm for education which starts where people are at and you develop it from there — even if it takes a long time.

Caro Webb (CW): Some people change faster than others. Most people who come to this project pass through the initial stages in photography and build up confidence. Through practising photography they become aware of where they might go on further — and then you've got to suggest ideas.

PC.: That is the crucial bit. If you look at any amateur photographic society you can see there is not an automatic connection between skills and doing something for a wider group of people. The intervention of Caro and myself is crucial for that process to take place.

How well does distribution function?

Q.: Do the photographs — personal work as well as the more general project work — often get shown in the community? How do people respond to local exhibitions?

PC.: *Doing Photography*, an exhibition which consisted of kids' personal work, was very well received. People were excited because they could recognise many of the views and people captured in the photographs.

CW.: But on the whole, not enough of the photographs produced by the people at Blackfriars are getting out into the community and being seen and that's something we have to work harder on. We are keen that pictures should go up in as many local venues as possible, places like launderettes, shop windows, doctors' waiting rooms and of course libraries and community centres in the area.

PC.: The whole area of distribution very often gets neglected because of the emphasis on the actual teaching. There is a growing file of photographs, so that after four years we have quite an extensive documentation of the area. The people who are working on issues such as redevelopment should be using our file much more. But once again community workers are mainly trained in verbal communication and it is difficult to get their minds to alter and make them see visual communication is just as important and useful.

Is the community darkroom operating as a social work agency?

PC.: We certainly don't do what you might call social work. We are just giving general support. We don't get too involved. For kids who have problems there are other workers here at the Settlement. And it's in their job-brief to give a very close social work-type support. We can complement what they are doing.

How effective is the production of the tape-slide shows?

Q.: Does the photography project produce enough tape-slide shows to satisfy the community's need for expressing itself about particular local issues to the local authorities?

CW.: Paul and I will be discussing the possibility of changing the way we are operating at the moment, particularly because there is a new worker coming in. I think we could become faster in producing tape-slide shows and also be known more in the community than we are — to the different groups. So that they would ring up and say: We are interested in making a tape-slide show. Can you help?

Waterloo, a community overrun by office development.

The city is spilling across the river into the traditionally industrial South Bank where the majority of residents are working-class.







The Blackfriars Settlement is a multi-purpose social action agency with three bases in the area of north Southwark and Waterloo. It serves a population of 20,000. Since 1965 Blackfriars Settlement's philosophy has been overhauled, drawing it away from the individual casework approach and more towards concepts of community action, where people are encouraged to act for themselves to improve conditions rather than have help funnelled in from the outside. ▲

In the darkroom of Blackfriars Photography Project. ▼

The Youth Photography Programme.

At first the kids usually take photographs of their family and friends, and later some undertake more specific projects about themselves or the community. ►

Micky McDonagh, age 14: «My Mum asleep. I took this picture because I thought she would be fascinated to see herself asleep.»





A photo from an exhibition produced by two teenagers for a local college nursery when the nursery was threatened with closure. The exhibition formed part of a campaign by the workers and students to keep the nursery open. ▲

Photo: Yazmine Judd.

The aim of the youth photography project is to teach photography to young people to encourage them to find ways of using their new skill – if they have interest – to the community's benefit.

A photo from a set produced by the Pensioners Photography Group for a local Day Centre for the Elderly. The premises were small and over-crowded. The photos were taken to show the conditions and assist the argument with the Social Services Department to get better premises. ▼

Photo: Jack Moore.

Documenting social action:

A pensioners group campaigning for the reopening of their local foot clinic and for the provision of a local chemist. ►

Photo: Paul Carter.







► *Action photography*

Photos on the side of a van taken into estates to stimulate discussion about redevelopment issues.

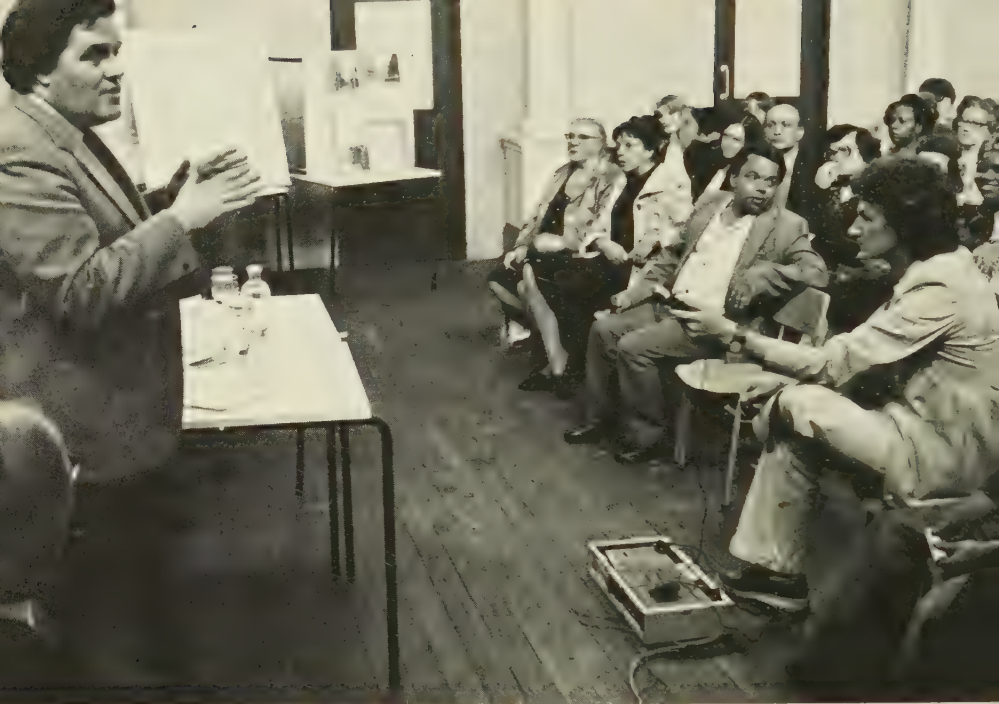
Photo: Paul Carter

◄ *Coin Street tape-slide show*

This picture is part of a tape-slide show concerning an area of redevelopment land on the South Bank of the river Thames, known as the Coin Street sites. It was made by Caro Webb with a group of residents in Waterloo who are fighting for housing to be built on the sites rather than offices and a hotel.

▲ *Evidence photograph for a Southwark Council tenant struggling to get major repairs carried out in his flat.*

Photo: Ron Hollis



Some pictures from the Tanswell tape-slide show.

(Project coordinator: Caro Webb)

The tape slide show was presented at the start of a public meeting between housing officials and the Tanswell Estate Tenants Association. Visually displaying the conditions of many flats, the tape slide confronted the officials with the range of problems needing urgent attention and action. It also allowed tenants who might not otherwise have spoken at a public meeting to express themselves clearly and strongly via the tape recorded interviews.

The Photography Project coordinators pointed out some of the specific advantages they see in using the tape slide method: «We realised that using colour was important because you could show the conditions much more effectively than in black and white....it brought them to life. The images being still mean that the viewer can dwell on and absorb the information in the pictures. The image can be projected to a large size on a screen which also lends impact and enables easy 'consumption' of the visual information. And if anyone wants to publish a print, it is easy to make a black and white one (or colour) from a slide, so you can convert the tape slide into an exhibition or publish pictures from it in a leaflet or whatever. Tape-slide is an accessible and flexible communication medium – even if people don't take their own pictures, they can have a great deal of control over the production and content of their tape-slide show.»



Commentary: In a survey that Tanswell Action Group carried out earlier this year, about a third of those interviewed had repairs outstanding in their flats.

Mrs. Roche from Davidge House speaks about her repair problems:

«There's a big slab in the kitchen — it's fallen down and my little girl got cut with it. I told them about it but nobody seemed to worry about it. Nobody came and has done anything about it...



«...I've had so many people up to see about this place, I'm sick of it, brownd off with it....
I screamed the other day, it got on my nerves so much. I'm on depression tablets.»



Commentary: In addition we feel that management should aim to be far more flexible and sensitive than it is at present. For instance, response to tenants needs for transfers both within and out of the estate is unnecessarily slow, even when a move would mean a more efficient use of housing.

Mrs. Newman: «They got this new block....I don't know why they don't give me a flat there. The stairs are just getting impossible.»



Commentary: Externally, conditions on the estate are also bad. Much of the guttering and drainage needs replacing. Often large pools of water collect around the yard drains ... Mrs. Hollamby, a longstanding tenant describes her battle with the drains.

Mrs. Hollamby: «Well, the drains, when it rains they get full up and when one gets unblocked, it blocks all the other drains and there's a terrible smell comes up out the drain outside my front door.



«And I keep thinking it's my sink, but when I go outside I find it's the drains, so I have to put disinfectant down them every day as well as bleach, but nothing seems to take the smell away. So I was wondering if the Council could do something about that.»



Commentary: Playspace for children of all ages is urgently needed but particularly for the younger children. Tenants would like the GLC to carry out their promise of fencing off the main grassed area and providing play facilities on it ... Liz Bell argues our case for play provision.

Liz Bell: «I think it's a big worry for all mothers with young children. There's nowhere for them to play except in the courtyard where there's nothing but cars, lorries, ambulances — you name it — anything comes round the estate and there's young ones running about...



«...Now there's a big grass area behind Santley House which the GLC have said we could have as a play area for the under-fives. Although this has been given to us, nothing has been done as yet and it would be a great advantage to this area...



«...Because young mothers find themselves cooped up in the houses with the children which causes a lot of problems in the home and you find that a lot of them are very nervous with this problem of not being able to get a break from their children.»

Q.: But would this not imply restructuring your priorities?

PC.: Sure, it does. And of course the other important thing is to get other people to do them with only minor back-up from us. One obstacle that inhibits the work with adults is the large youth programme. We work two or three nights a week ourselves because we haven't managed to get the volunteers to take on full responsibility yet. So we are working day and night, and often we just get tired and it's reducing our energy and time.

Would you ever consider expanding into video?

PC.: We are not *even* with still photography doing as extensive a job as we could be doing — and we are two people. So I don't find it justified to recruit a person to do video. Then I also think that still photography has been underestimated in its usefulness and potential within this kind of work. And video — although extremely useful — has been overemphasised and overglamorised. Just consider the amount of money that you need to set up a good video resource — with portapacks and editing deck — and compare the cost of that to what you can do with still cameras and the number of people you can involve. For one portapack you can get ten £100 cameras! There is a shortage of resources so you've got to choose very carefully. As long as you have a video project which is utilising its potential very well — fine! For example, the movement aspect, the interview technique and the instantaneous playback facilities. Then you should also be willing to train local people and let them handle the equipment. We would like to have a video project working parallel with ours, but we can't justify the time to organise such a project ourselves at the moment.

Lessons to be learned

Q.: Let us say there is someone who wants to become involved in community photography but has very little money and does not know exactly how to go about setting up a project. What advice would you give?

PC.: Firstly, you can't do it by yourself; you have to be part of a group. I think it was a good first step making contact with my local organisation. Because through them I got into the various community networks. Then you start becoming realistic about the community's needs. So you are not an outsider with a set of stereotyped ideas of what the community is about.

Q.: How would you finance your work?

PC.: What was crucial for our success was creating the youthwork area, because it was really the easiest money to get — sessional youthwork pay-

ments. You might even try to get money from the Adult Education Department. Very often they need photography tutors, but you could probably have quite a lot of say in how those courses are structured and could turn your course into a community photography course for adults. Then there are all the grant-giving bodies. You've just got to write the letters off to them — if you want to do that. I wish though we wouldn't have to depend so much on the Arts Council. I don't like working under the insecurity that we've got. I feel that if the project had grown closer to the existing resources of the community it wouldn't be as big as it is now, but it would be more stable. What I'm interested in is finding out how to mobilise these resources before having to go outside the community. Just trying to be as self-sufficient as possible. Because that would involve local people even more.

Q.: But you could never draw a wage from local resources, could you?

PC.: Perhaps not. Maybe some commercial work could be done with the facilities to cover at least part of the wages of the coordinators. Some of the more enthusiastic users of a project might be drawn into the commercial side too. Obviously commercial work would inhibit the growth of the community photography project. But if it is a question of survival that option should be considered.

Summary of activities since 1978

Tape-slide work

Coin Street tape-slide show.

Made for local campaign to get low-rise family housing built on vacant sites on the South Bank riverside as opposed to further office developments. It was essentially an information piece designed to present the facts and arguments concerning this major planning issue to the local population. The show has been through two revisions to improve it and bring the story up to date, and a third revision is under way with the aim of presenting it to the official Public Inquiry currently «hearing» all the conflicting planning applications for the developments on these sites.

Youth Employment tape-slide show.

Designed to help school-leavers and unemployed youth about how to get a job. Using interviews from and photographs by teenagers. The show will eventually tour schools and youth clubs.

Teaching work

Adults.

3 month courses have been developed on the basis of one session a week. Run only by the coordinators, these courses have catered to Adult Literacy students, pensioners, and community activists. They are partly funded by a local Adult Education College.

The two-day crash courses have widened to take on community workers, youth workers, teachers, etc., from many parts of London, in response to demand. This openness may shortly be restricted again however to taking on only local workers and residents.

Youth.

4 month short-term groups now firmly established. The content and «success» of teaching kids photography is continually under review by both volunteers and coordinators. The expectation of kids doing community photography has diminished and thought is being concentrated on how to make maximum use of the time available and get volunteers themselves more involved in photographing and doing joint projects with the kids and for the Photography Project as a whole.

Exhibition work

A second major exhibition called *Using Photography* was produced in July 1978. Consisting of 54 panels, the exhibition demonstrated the complete range of photographic work done by the Photography Project. It has been exhibited and toured round the country by the Half Moon Photography Workshop and serves as a stimulus to similar work developing in other areas.

Resource provision

Use of the darkroom, equipment and other Project facilities and information has grown enormously — there is now continual demand, not only from other Settlement projects but from community groups all round London. Accessibility has always been important but the role impinges significantly on the time of the coordinators.

Problem areas of the work

- Distribution of photographic work of both students and coordinators is not developed enough. Local viewing spaces in launderettes, foyers, doctors' waiting rooms, etc., still not properly cultivated and used

enough. Showings of tape-slide shows is considerably less than would be desirable.

- Production of specific information or thematic exhibitions and tape-slide shows is held back by administrative-, resource use-, and teaching activities.
- Linking-up teaching with the making of tape-slide shows, exhibitions and one-off jobs for community groups is still practically a problem.

Appendix

1) *Waterloo, a community occurrence by office development*

The Settlement catchment area overlaps two inner London boroughs — Lambeth and Southwark. It is necessary to understand the physical nature of the area to further appreciate the role and function of the Photography Project in the community.

«Just across the river from the Houses of Parliament, there are families living in blocks of nineteenth century flats with no running hot water or bathrooms. Half a mile down the river there are new fully equipped flats sitting empty. They start at £ 18,000 for a two-room bachelor pad, and they are therefore outside the price range of local people. The majority of residents in the area are working-class. They are from a variety of racial backgrounds. Most are crammed into blocks of flats hemmed in by a traffic choked network of major roads. There is little open space. Even more space, air and light is being taken up by the millions of tons of concrete and steel in the office blocks mushrooming up all round. The City is spilling across the river into the traditionally industrial South Bank. Long established firms are selling out to developers and taking jobs away with them. The new jobs coming with the offices do not suit many of the established skills of the local workforce. The increasing office population has more money to spend than local people. Shops in the area are changing their wares and opening times to suit this lucrative new market. People in north Southwark and Waterloo see the wants of another group of people being met out of all proportion to their own. It is easy to begin to feel weak and unimportant in the face of all this development. A lethargy grows from this feeling of impotence. That all too familiar inner city depression deepens.» (From *Photography in Action for the Community*; a stencilled paper written by Paul Carter for the purpose of fund-raising).

How has it happened that such an unbalanced redevelopment of a traditionally Labour Party governed borough has taken place? First the docks closed, and then, about 15 years ago, pressure started mounting to build offices in the area. The price of land went sky-high and both Lambeth and Southwark saw this as a means of making money. They thought that by allowing office development in the north of the two boroughs they would get an extra income from rates – money which they could then use elsewhere. Now, after having realised how much the remaining community of about 60,000 people has to suffer from an environment that is still deteriorating, it is literally impossible for them to buy out the developers. But there is a constant struggle going on to try to persuade the two Councils to use their power of giving planning permission in order to ultimately control the further development in the area.

The main issue is to get mixed development: some offices, industry and houses. There are two community development groups in Lambeth and Southwark trying to work in this direction of balanced development. They already have had some success in Lambeth where there will be fewer offices built than originally planned. Success and failure of the local campaign against the all-dominating inhuman living conditions will very much depend on the different community groups, their own will and determination to take up social and political action and the strength of organisations like the Blackfriars Settlement. Its declared purpose is «to encourage and enable people to move towards the vision of a caring, sharing society; to bring about the maximum involvement of the group, neighbourhood or community in solving the problems that concern them, in participating in the decisions that affect them and in running their own affairs.» (From Blackfriars Settlement's Annual Report 1977).

2) He always succeeded in raising enough money to survive the harsh periods, eventually achieving some kind of future for the project. Paul Carter: «Mind you it was difficult. For most of those three years I was living on twenty pounds a week. Fortunately, the Settlement was so enthusiastic about having a photography project that they covered our deficit.» After the first grants ran out, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) stepped in to provide some sessional youthwork payments to cover Paul's wage. There was also some additional money from the Greater London Arts Association (GLAA) and the ILEA to buy the necessary materials. However, there were times when the project was down to its last ten pounds and in danger of folding up. As a last resort some peo-

ple were giving money out of their own pockets, and there were two anonymous donations of £100 each. Since 1976 the situation improved with a £1,400 grant from the Arts Council, another £1,000 from the Allen Lane Foundation (an educational trust) and an extra-sessional payment from the ILEA. This extra money made it possible to employ a second full-time worker. For the current financial year 1977/78 a total sum of £7,000 has come in from the Arts Council (£4,000), ILEA (£1,500), GLAA (£500), the Jubilee Trust (£400) and various other fund-raising activities. Although this situation seems healthy, the project workers are critical of the fact that a large portion of their time and energy is regularly spent on preparing grant applications. They would rather see this time devoted to their immediate community photography work.

Research material

This group portrait of the Blackfriars Photography Project has been based on the following material:

- The quotations of the project coordinators have been selected and edited from tape recorded interviews conducted in August and November, 1977, at the project's premises.
- Several pamphlets written by the project coordinators for the purpose of information and fundraising:
 - Photography in Action for the Community. The Photography project at the Blackfriars Settlement.
 - Community Photography Project. A proposal from Blackfriars Settlement.
 - Photography in Community Development.
 - Youth Photography Programme. Blackfriars Settlement.
- Other material:
 - Doing Photography, from *Camerawork*, No.2, April/May 1976.
 - Blackfriars Settlement's Annual Report 1977.

The WELD Photography Project

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Introduction

The development of community photography at WELD started in a similar way to the Blackfriars Photography Project in London: a professional photographer teamed up with a community project, documented its activities and used the photographs for publicity and fund-raising. Later on workshops with kids and adults followed.

After WELD's first photographer, Colin Cuthbert, left WELD for another job in Newcastle in 1976, the management committee, together with the other workers, decided to put the emphasis in the Photography Project more on teaching. It was felt important to set up a darkroom so that photographic skills could be passed on to interested individuals and groups instead of being monopolised by one particular professional worker.

It was the first time in Britain that a job was officially advertised for a «community photographer», with a specific job brief to establish workshops and document WELD's activities. Up till then, community photographers had always had to create their own jobs and slowly build up a steady income through grants from different sources. WELD appointed Jon Stewart, a graduate from a Durham teacher training course in film and television, who had also developed a strong interest and practical skills in photography. During his first year at WELD he set up a photography workshop, involving fifteen people and assembled a very successful exhibition about the 1977 playscheme. The exhibition was shown locally as well as touring places in and out of Birmingham.

When Jon Stewart began the WELD job, he had very little experience in community work. His first year was therefore a period of intense learning, including such basic skills as how to work in a team and cooperate with other projects at WELD and how to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. These were precisely the areas he found most difficult to cope with, especially after having undergone a highly specialised and individualistic training in the academic world. As increasing numbers of people become attracted to the expanding field of community photography and community communication in general, it will be necessary to develop suitable forms of field-based training to help photographers bridge the gap between the often isolated and sheltered environment of college and the harsher requirements of life in community development projects like WELD. Equally, the gulf between the commercial scene and community activity needs to be taken into account. This chapter on the community photography project at WELD therefore concentrates on the initial

year's experience of Jon Stewart. It is hoped that a personal account of his learning experience will help other people, who may find themselves in parallel project situations, to avoid basic mistakes and to derive encouragement from the positive aspects of the WELD Photography Project.

Before going into the details of Jon Stewart's experience as a community photographer, the reader will get now an opportunity to have a closer look at the «Handsworth»-community in Birmingham where WELD is operating. Then follows an account on WELD itself and how that organisation has developed into a community education and arts project.

«Welding» a multi-cultural community

Handsworth is situated within Birmingham's inner-ring area, about a mile and a half north of the city centre. It encompasses the factories of the West Bromwich Road as well as the greener and more comfortable residential district of Handsworth Wood.

In the 1950s, a stream of West Indian immigrants started to move into the formerly lower middle class community. They were soon followed by a second wave of arrivals from the Asian countries, which now, in the late 1970s, has been reduced to a thin trickle. The poor economic conditions confronting the newcomers — working in sweatshops or low-paid jobs in the catering industries and the exploitation of their low and very dependent social status as foreigners — led to an increasing deterioration of living conditions in Handsworth as well as in other parts of Birmingham with a high immigrant population¹. In fact, Handsworth became one of those extremely disadvantaged inner-city areas in terms of multiple economic and social pressures on immigrant as well as indigenous families. Doctors, social workers and teachers were faced with immense problems and given little practical aid to help solve them.

In this context it was hardly surprising that more and more concerned young professionals and students started to think about alternative ways of changing this depressing state of affairs. Between 1966 and 1968, a group of teachers at the local Westminster primary school came together to discuss their common concern about children grossly underperforming. The best way to tackle the problems of literacy, which were rooted in the high economic and social pressures on immigrant families, including the clash of different cultural and educational values between the British school system and the West Indian and Asian life-styles, was seen to be the creation of firm links between home and school.

In 1968 the same group of teachers started a community education experiment called «WELD», which stood for the *Westminster Endeavour for Liaison and Development*. One of the group's first projects was a summer holiday playscheme, to give parents, children and teachers a useful opportunity for meeting informally, so that cultural barriers between home and school could be reduced². From 1968–1970, during three weeks of each summer holiday, the school was turned into a temporary recreational centre, providing a range of activities including woodwork, art and craft, needlework, dressing-up play, and indoor and outdoor games. Coach trips for parents and children were organised along with shows in the afternoons including conjurers and cartoon films. The popularity of the centre was enormous. In the summer of 1970, an average of 200 children attended the afternoon shows.

The «centre» was run through the active cooperation of parents, student volunteers from Birmingham and other parts of the country, and other interested people connected with WELD. An average of 35 people a day assisted at the centre. Very soon WELD began expanding its experiment throughout the year. A youth club held in local schools and church halls provided facilities for badminton, table-tennis, drama, needle work, art and cookery. A folk club for adults met twice a month in a neighbourhood public house. Regular dances were organised, which proved to be popular as they fulfilled a need for regular contact between individuals, who otherwise would have little opportunity to meet. The WELD club, which met twice a month, provided a forum for members' ideas. WELD acted as a referral agency for people in housing need and maintained consultation with a local housing improvement association. In addition, a brief monthly news-sheet, *WELD NEWS*, was produced, which kept members informed of all ongoing activities. During the first three years of testing out the possibilities of approaching the education of children more from a community point of view, it proved practicable to contribute effectively to the educational and cultural development of the area through meeting the immediate needs of the children³.

WELD was then ready to establish its community education and arts project on a more permanent basis. In 1971, the organisation moved to New Trinity, a former Church of England Primary School now owned by Birmingham City Council. The building was turned into a multi-purpose agency hosting basically the same range of activities which the summer playscheme had provided during the first three years of the experiment. In addition, WELD put its major emphasis on pre-school education as a way

to deal with literacy problems, on community arts and on general social activities for different age groups.

WELD as a community arts centre

WELD has always stressed the relevance of educational activities operating within an arts framework. The group believes that the arts of painting, drawing, working with clay, weaving, creative writing, playing theatre, making music and also photography and film help creating a freer atmosphere to work in than is normally possible in school. WELD holds that such an approach stimulates the emotional development of people, a sphere often seriously neglected in the big classroom, which hinders individual development and cooperative learning.

WELD therefore started to operate as an arts centre where a variety of creative activities could develop side by side. They hoped that over a period of time, all the young people in the neighbourhood could enjoy the opportunity of growing up to accept art as part of their lives. They could become familiar with many of the techniques and tools employed in artistic expression⁴.

But WELD's activities have not been limited to youth work, social events and arts projects alone. The organisation became a community development project in the broadest sense, when the whole catchment area was scheduled for redevelopment. The local inhabitants had to find channels to voice their negative opinions about the proposed schemes, and in this way WELD became centrally involved in the *Trinity/Heathfield Residents Association*, formed in September, 1973.

The WELD Annual Report, 1975/76, states: «The Residents' Association was quickly established and soon had a very strong and representative committee of local people. Our main energies were channelled into a sustained campaign to persuade the City to change their proposal, reclassify the houses, and to start a programme of improvement speedily to prevent any further deterioration. In conjunction with WELD and the Workers Educational Association, a series of very successful classes were organised at New Trinity under the general title «Urban renewal and the future of your home». These classes gave local people an insight into the intricacies of the Urban Renewal Programme which was to prove invaluable in our subsequent negotiations with City officers responsible for the programme.

«After many months of negotiations, countless meetings and a series of petitions to the City, we finally heard in March 1975 that the Housing Department had agreed to retain virtually all the houses in Area 20. Within a matter of weeks, work on the first house, number 77 Wilson Road, was started and it was occupied by September.»⁵

The WELD Photography Project

How Jon Stewart became interested in community photography and joined WELD

A first encounter with action photography

Jon Stewart: «When I was in college at Durham, some friends of mine were living in a street which was going to be pulled down. They had organised an action group and one of them asked me: «Can you come and take some photographs this afternoon and have them ready for tomorrow?» I did this, and the photos were put into an application which resulted in a preservation order being put on the building. That involvement very much affected me and was really my first insight into photography as being alive and how it actually could be used within a social context.»

Which way to go?

Jon Stewart (JS.): «After college I first wasn't quite sure which way to go. I went back to the States where I had previously spent a year as an exchange student. That gave me a chance to take some time off, so I didn't have to make a decision. By the time I came back after six months, I had made a very definite decision. For one or two years I would try to do photography specifically within a community. I thought that would combine my desire to do personal photography with my teaching skills and to use photography generally as a tool for social change. When I came back from my trip to the States my brother sent me a telegram saying that in *New Society* a job was advertised for Telford Community Arts. I went for an interview and was asked back to do a project as a sort of an assessment — for four weeks. I had to set up a darkroom and to do work with the women's group for an exhibition. It didn't work out mutually. I liked the work but I didn't really think I could work with them and they wanted somebody with more skills who would not just be doing photography or not necessarily as much as I wanted to do.

«After the Telford project fell through I went up to Newcastle and through contacts I met people from a community project. At that time they were trying to set up their own newspaper with a photojournalist. It was a job creation scheme and I got very excited about it. It got to the point where they offered me the job before they had the money, which finally didn't come through.

«I was giving up hope of community work and had to think about how to earn a living. I took on teaching photography at an intermediate education centre in Crouch End, London, for seven months. At the same time I started a company with another guy to do fashion photography. We wanted to offer dress designers to photograph their designs, put the photographs in a folder, so that when they were selling their products they didn't have to send a model and a dress around. This was at very reduced costs, but still allowed us to make quite a lot of money if it worked. We went leafleting all the dress designers in London, but we didn't get one order. I went through a very depressed stage because everything I was doing was failing or wasn't leading anywhere.

«I decided to go to Nigeria and managed to get myself photographic work to cover my costs to go there. I did photographic assignments for VSO, Christian Aid and the British Council on the understanding that they couldn't give me any funding, but would only pay if I had the goods they wanted to buy. I travelled around the country and did this photographic work which turned out to be very successful. They made postcards out of some of my pictures, the VSO bought practically all the photographs I took for them.

«Just before I went to Nigeria, WELD advertised the community photography job and I had an interview. I heard I'd got the job in Nigeria, so after my eight week trip I had that to come back to. I started at WELD in February 1977.»

Getting the project started

Jon Stewart first spent two or three weeks building shelves for the darkroom and sorting out its materials and equipment. He also began basic work in the community, meeting people and attending different activities, like the youth club, just to show his face and to invite people to see him at the darkroom if they wanted to develop or print some pictures.

Between Colin Cuthbert's departure and Jon Stewart's arrival at WELD, there had been a break in the Photography Project of seven months.

Therefore, there was a definite need to show that photography was alive and available again. The Easter holiday playscheme was the first opportunity to spread the news about the reopening of the project. For two weeks, anybody who wanted to do photography could just sign up, and Jon Stewart showed them how to use the cameras and flashguns. He would take time off to print up the photographs which the kids had shot. These were arranged on panels to be displayed in the centre. The kids scribbled their comments on the panels — a simple way of interacting with the produced images. Other children came to the darkroom, four at a time. Some were bored after the first visit and didn't come back. Others returned and continued to follow their interest after the two week playscheme. The aim of the Easter project was fulfilled: to publicise the availability of photography to the children and stimulate their interest in doing it themselves.

The workshops

The darkroom is an overcrowded room with three enlargers, a rotary glazer, two work surfaces, a sink and some shelves. There is also a workroom, which can be blacked out, with a dry-mount press, light box, filing cabinets, two work surfaces, and other storage space for equipment and photographs. Then there are six cameras available: four Pentaxes, an Olympus and a Lubitol. During the two months after the Easter playscheme, the Photography Project was in the process of being established on a firmer base again. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings were kids' workshops, on Friday evenings adults were using the facilities, while on Wednesday afternoons the darkroom was booked by a group of kids from Westminster school. Vanley Burke, a professional photographer, was employed part-time as a sessional worker and helped run one of the workshops. Very soon a group of seven young people, ranging from nine to nineteen years, emerged and showed interest in continuing photography on a regular basis. Many more went through a short period of training, but then lost their initial interest. The kids came from different backgrounds: some had difficulties in school, others were «bright», receptive and learned to pick up the necessary photographic skills very quickly.

Jon Stewart recalled his experiences with so-called problem children: «Everybody, including myself, had a hard time of just controlling them. But then I found that once they had got a camera in their hands I didn't need to have any worries and perhaps I enjoyed being with these kids more than

with other children I worked with. But I dreaded it when it was time to say stop. Like, I took them in the car to parks and other places. When we were driving back again, they knew it was the end of that day, and they would start fooling around, so that I had to keep on saying, well stop doing this, stop that. But when they actually were doing photography there was this incredible intensity of involvement. And some of them, who usually were such a problem, would come back continually pestering me with «can I do photography this afternoon?» I feel there is a great need for larger dark-room facilities and more people to help organise workshops, so that these demands can be met.

«Initially they started to take photographs of just each other, or of us as a group. Then they took photographs of things around that they discovered. Some lovely ones: at one park they took a snapshot of an elderly couple sitting on benches. So they were expanding their viewpoint outwards from their immediate environment at WELD to the broader neighbourhood of Handsworth. First they used to take the photographs miles away from the object — so that the figures were tiny little dots. Therefore I told them to go right up close. And it was embarrassing sometimes because the kids would then go up extremely close, just to test the freedom I allowed them. It was very interesting to see the reactions from the people having their photographs taken. Some showed a rather shocked response and often it ended up with me having to explain WELD and what I was doing. Their responses were a mixture of genuine interest and patronising comments like «Oh, how marvellous and lovely!»

On Wednesday afternoons six children from Westminster School come to WELD because they have a variety of problems. Some have language difficulties, some are shy, some are extrovert and can't concentrate. At New Trintiy they can do a number of things in a freer atmosphere than school. Together with the youth worker, Mandy Oko-Osi, Jon Stewart produced a modern version of Cinderella. The kids also do photography. Jon Stewart described the sessions in this way: «The kids are a bit restless to really maintain interest working in the darkroom over a certain length of time. Sometimes it would take them an hour just to produce one print. So I took







Youth club
Photo: Jon Stewart



Knees-up in Aston Park. Summer playscheme 1978.
Photo: Jon Stewart









Photography workshop

◀ Initially they started to take photographs of just each other, of friends or members of their families.

▲ The first project of Pauline and Sharon — a series of photographs about West Indian hair-styles.

them out into the neighbourhood as often as possible where they could photograph a lot. The first time we went to their school they took photographs of the building and their mates. The next two or three weeks they came up into the darkroom and printed them. I helped print a few extras. At the end we had a nice series of pictures which were put up at their school and aroused great interest. A lot of kids asked if they could do photography as well.

«Then together with Fay, a part-time worker at WELD, we went on trips to a little zoo and some parks and took photographs there. Again we made black and white prints of them, which were put up at the school. Then I found that the printing process was so slow and the output so small that I ended up doing most of the printing. I switched to slides, so that they could have a lot more images to look at instantaneously. Then I tried to get them to think more about what they were doing. We spent most of one afternoon trying to talk about the images of their slides, mostly pictures from our outings — kids posing, playing on the swings, and landscapes. I taped the discussion with the idea of a tapeslide in mind, which could be presented to the classroom. But somehow it didn't work out. The images they were taking were not powerful enough to make a tape-slide show really successful. And the kids didn't have the concentration to put the effort into it, that was out of their ability scope. So I rethought the whole process. And what came up was to do a «book» instead, with photographs about the activities of the Westminster Group at WELD — the Cinderella play for example. Two of the kids would photograph what the others were doing. They then would do some of the printing — with me doing the rest — and all of us sorting out the interesting ones and writing a little bit about what we were doing. One copy of the book could then go to Westminster School and the other would be kept as a record at WELD.»

Q.: How did the «good» kids at WELD pick up photography?

Jon Stewart: «Two girls, fourteen and sixteen, who started photography together, very soon took photographs in the city, where they went with Vanley Burke. They became self-confident enough so that they went on to their first project — a series of photographs about West Indian hairstyles.

«Another two girls of school-leaving age originally came once a week. But when they became able to do the developing and printing all themselves, they came a lot more. They took photographs of their school friends and started selling the pictures — giving the profit back to WELD. One of them

already wishes to teach the basics of photography herself. Before Christmas they had a school competition and wanted me to give them a project. The idea is now to produce a set of photographs documenting the development of an urban farm on wasteland around the canal basin.

«After the summer a nineteen-year-old youth started to come in regularly. He is a Rastafarian and therefore was interested in taking photographs of his brethren and pictures from books dealing with the Rastafarian movement. First he took pictures like mad, but then very soon, he questioned why he was doing photography. What's the purpose? Is it leading anywhere or is he doing it because he had nothing else to do? He is still looking for an answer. We also started to talk about the technical possibilities of taking more sophisticated pictures. For example, he is very much a person close to nature. So I said, if you see a nice tree and you like the shape of that tree, try not just to record it, but photograph it by thinking about how you can emphasise what it is you like about that tree. If it is a tall tree that you think has power, take a low shot so that it accentuates the height. If you think it looks foreboding, do it with a white or grey background, so the tree appears black. That's just an example. You have to decide for yourself what you think is foreboding and how to do it; but experiment like that and don't be afraid of using a lot of film.

«It takes a long time to establish a relationship, particularly because of the cultural differences, especially language. The whole thing becomes a two-way learning process, which makes the work very worthwhile.»

Q.: What are your comments on the workshops?

Jon Stewart: «What I found was that after they learned the basics they then are quite happy to go along by themselves. They might need somebody there to sort of hold their hand until they have gained some confidence. Then they get to the point where they have gained enough experience to work by themselves and they either get bored because there is nothing new coming in and don't know where to go with their skill, or else they run into new technical problems and don't know how to solve them. So they need new advice by a skilled person. Those are the different stages of learning photography: at times you need somebody, at times you don't. Most of the kids and adults coming to the workshops are now at that second stage. Although there are others just starting to learn from scratch.»

Summer 1977

During the summer holidays of 1977, Jon Stewart decided to adopt a similar approach to that for the Easter project: to hand out cameras and encourage the children to take lots of pictures themselves. Because he was busy doing the van driving, the two cameras were handed to two adult helpers whose responsibility it was to show people how to operate them. It was very simple. The camera shutter speed was set at 125th of a second, leaving only the aperture and focus for the photographer to set. So the way they were using the camera was very much like taking snapshots. A large quantity of photographs were taken. 38 reels of film (36 shots each) were consumed together with a great number of slides. The photographs were of the activities organised by WELD. These included a week's holiday for families in the Malvern Hills and a four-week playscheme. The playscheme catered for about one hundred children, with many trips out of Handsworth, a play, drum workshop and many arts and crafts activities. At the end of each week, Jon Stewart printed a large selection of pictures, mounting them on panels, so that everybody could see something of the results almost straight away.

After the summer, he spent a lot of time preparing an exhibition. He had to do all of the printing, because the members of the workshop were not sufficiently motivated or experienced to undertake such an energetic project. 120 photographs were printed for the show.

Jon Stewart: «Then we laid them all out on tables in the centre. The rest of the workers looked through them and made their comments. Then I asked a friend of mine, who is not involved in WELD, to give his opinion, because I felt our subjective views of the photographs included points which other people did not necessarily pick up. In the end, we chose 55 photographs which were mounted on sheets of white cardboard.»

The pictures were presented in a professional fashion. Enough space was left between the photographs, allowing the images to breath. Some of them were subtitled with letraset captions, but only those pictures which needed more explanation. Most of the photographs stood on their own. They captured many aspects of people enjoying themselves, seen through the eyes of those, mostly children, who had been involved in the holiday scheme. There were some outstanding pictures of the drum workshop, which reflected that human closeness so easily triggered off through the process of making music. One photograph focused on a boy putting all his might into banging a steel drum, while a girl looks happily on. Another, portrays eight people —

a single adult, some teenagers and children — grouped around bongos and other instruments. You can see the people relating, how they speak to each other and point out things by making gestures. From the family holiday in the Malvern Hills you can observe a child looking at a map — where to go? — with a group of people standing around, relaxing, and a mother drinking a coke. A father is pulling the jacket of his daughter straight. A girl is lazing on the grass. Then you see scenes from strawberry-picking and moments from the outings.

The exhibition was first shown at WELD, but only briefly on an open day before Christmas, 1977. Then it travelled down to *Centerprise* in London, a bookshop and arts-based community centre which has some exhibition space in its cafe. Afterwards the exhibition went to the Westminster Primary School, visited local libraries, the Action Centre and other community groups.

The fact that the exhibition was assembled in a professional way by a single individual and then first shown to the «outside world», rather than the Handsworth community, triggered off some heated discussions among the WELD workers about the function of community photography. One summed up their criticism of Jon Stewart's approach. Mandy Oko-Osi: «My arguments with Jon about the exhibition was that the show itself was fine, but what the hell was it doing in London and places like the Arts Lab? None of the people in our community go to the Arts Lab. What's the point of getting any kind of award for a photographic exhibition if it must tour London or whatever? Isn't that part of the system? And the system doesn't work for our kids! Otherwise we wouldn't be here. I think it's more important for us to get the local community to see and to understand those photographs. We could take the displays to the Handsworth market. Maybe that seems to be a funny place for a photographic exhibition to be, but there are the people who are going to relate to those pictures. Black people are pleased to see their children having learned a skill. The parents of the black kids learning photography are immensely proud of them not only being able to take photographs, but also to develop and print them. Let's be honest, there are not that many black people with actual skills, because for years they have been kept down. So they are proud if they see black people with skills. So why not take the exhibition to the market? Not only lots of people will see it, but many people the kids know will see it.»

Jon Stewart basically agreed with these arguments, but wanted to prove to the art world and other community projects that community

photography is on the map and is as valuable as any other art activity. Jon Stewart: «The other members of our group thought that I should be working on a rather less professional exhibition, to be shown just in the local area. But I felt that the quality of the photographs justified such an exhibition, and that some of that quality should come out to show what community photography is all about. I was also aiming the exhibition at the funding bodies as all our grants came up for renewal around that time. I wanted to do something that is really good, not half-hearted, not something that is just in the middle of the road. Also to say that it hasn't been in local surroundings is not true, it has been in schools and local libraries. I'm not saying that the exhibition is excellent. There are a lot of flaws in it, and I wouldn't do it the same again. What I'll aim for the next time is for the children to do all of the work themselves: taking the photographs, printing them, editing them, and mounting them.»

Summary

Jon Stewart: «During my first year at WELD my emphasis has been on advertising and promoting community photography; to show that photography is available as much as possible to whoever wishes to use it and for whatever use, except racist organisations or politically something I couldn't agree with. But so far that problem has not arisen. My intention was that out of the number of people trying their hand at photography will come a group who are sincerely interested in learning the skills of photography. What that is useful for, depends very much on the individual and on the group. It might be purely for a hobby, which I feel is valid. The other possibility is that individuals start to see photography as a way to express a statement — whether political or nonpolitical is their choice. However, I hope they will be political and help lead towards a greater understanding of social conditions and the necessity of change. That sounds very idealistic, but I suppose that is what's at the back of my mind.

«So in the first phase, I let a lot of people in; I took only a very few photographs of my own, and what I mainly did in the darkroom was printing other people's work. That was certainly a conscious decision. It was to attract people by just publicising the images and therefore making them interested in taking up photography themselves.

«Out of the first year has come a group of thirteen attenders who have now achieved the basic skills. Then there are another four people who have shown considerable interest. So the darkroom is nearing its full capacity,

but still leaving some space for new people to come in just to experiment. And I'm sure that some people will drop out anyway and new members will join.

«The current move is for some of the users of the darkroom to help print other people's photographs, as I did at the start. They can do that to practise their own printing skills, as well as putting something back into WELD. So it's give and take. They should realise that they have a responsibility to WELD; and the way they can contribute something is by printing photographs for WELD. What those photographs are will depend on how the photography project develops. Possible ideas include documentation of activities within WELD, or documentation of the environment.

«Hopefully, I can now do more photographs, because I don't have to think about setting the structure up any more. I could produce an exhibition about the situation of people in Handsworth or a document of the urban environment — or a statement about WELD. It's all open.

«I also want to document the daily activities at WELD and use photography as a communication tool for what's happening within WELD — in the playgroup, with the Westminster group, and also possibly working with the Handsworth Language Project.

«Now I have the basic group together, I would like to look out for volunteers, maybe students, who would help in the workshops.»

Q.: What would you do differently, if you started such a project again?

JS.: «Be a lot tighter in the use of my time. Working a bit more with timetables — which I didn't know how to do before. I very much let myself be carried away by whatever came up. There also shouldn't be such a long gap between the predecessor leaving and the new worker starting the job. If possible, the previous worker should stay on while the next person starts, so that you work together and experience gets passed on.»

Q.: What aspects of your first year as a community photographer particularly please you?

JS.: «The way I publicised the project by just handing out the cameras indiscriminately and by printing a lot of photographs and putting them up as well. That made other people think — well, if they can do it, why can't I? And that very much helped to get the workshops going.»

WELD revisited

When I was discussing the final draft of this chapter with Jon Stewart we both thought that one important aspect missing was the users' point of view of the darkroom facilities and how they perceive the teaching support they get from the co-ordinator. We both felt also that it would be interesting to see what had been happening at WELD since I had visited the place for the first time five months ago. So I travelled up to Birmingham again, had several chats with people using the darkroom, with Vanley Burke, the paid sessional photographer, who helps Jon running the workshops, and with Jon himself, who filled me in with the latest developments at WELD.

The bad news first. Just a few weeks ago some unknown people entered WELD on a Saturday night and set fire to part of the building. Jon Stewart: «They laid a paraffin trail of rags from the end of the hall to the kitchen, turned on all the gas taps, left two buckets of paraffin in the kitchen and lit it up. Luckily, it was not as bad as it might have been because the hatchway between the kitchen and the hall had been left open so the gas had been able to diffuse and not to build up. The firemen said that if they had arrived later the whole place would have exploded. What has been lost is the playgroup equipment, tables, chairs, screen-printing facilities and a mass of other arts equipment. The roof has to be taken down and replaced. The hall is completely out of use at present, which obviously has affected our work. Fortunately, the photography project did not have to suffer from the fire attack because the darkroom is housed in a neighbourhood building. Just after the fire I took a number of photographs of what was left from New Trinity, then produced a series of 60 x 20 prints which we put up in our shop-window as a fund-raising appeal. We also used one of the photographs for an appeal-poster asking for help, money, and equipment. So far the response from the neighbourhood has been marvellous.»

The good news. WELD's application to the Inner City Partnership and Urban Renewal for the acquisition of another building next to New Trinity has been successful. That means WELD will have extended facilities to cater better for what they already do. The Photography Project will get a new darkroom hopefully having six to eight enlargers. There will also be a larger work space next to it with a dryer, a dry-mount press, and possibly an area of the wall painted as a screen for slide-shows so that slides can be edited. That will let the Photography Project grow considerably, allowing more children and adults to get involved with the project.

Action photography

During the last five months the photographic activities at WELD have continued to develop along the lines: teaching basic skills — documenting WELD's activities — doing project work, with an emphasis on action photography. At the time of my visit an interesting action project was just coming off the ground; the Lozell's Road Campaign. Lozell's Road in Handsworth is a lively shopping street, but very much run down with many derelict buildings. Nobody seems to be doing anything about this bleak state of affairs. The City is planning a road widening scheme which would mean knocking down one half of the street, but nobody really knows when it is going to happen. Consequently, because of this uncertainty many of the shop-owners are beginning to move out and will not renew their leases. People from WELD's catchment area often go shopping in Lozell's Road and therefore Jon Stewart decided to stimulate discussion among Lozell's Residents Association, shoppers, and shop-owners by producing photographic material which would be publicly displayed raising questions like «Did you know that a road-widening scheme is going through?» Besides notifying the residents of the area about the planned scheme and the many shops earmarked for demolition Jon would like to know more about what the residents wish to see happening as regards their shopping facilities, and how the shop-owners themselves view the situation. He then found out that the Lozell's Residents Association had already put a petition to the shop-owners and residents stating dissatisfaction with the council's approach to the situation. Together with Jean, a new member of the Photography Project, Jon produced a set of photographs to be shown at a meeting of the Residents Association. The photographs pictured the street and the captions underneath said whether the buildings were to be retained or demolished and when that was to occur. The photographs were mounted on individual boards along one wall with a map showing the demarcation line and the proposed plans from the City. JS.: «The response to the photographs was great; everybody was impressed and after the meeting a lot of questions and comments were voiced — «I didn't know the road-widening scheme was going through, I didn't know that there would be another ten years before a decision will be made; isn't it terrible, I didn't realise how many empty shops there were» — it really showed that there was a lot of concern which only had to be harnessed.»

«The next development was with the Community Forum, a centrally based group acting as a liaison between all residents associations in Birmingham. Their concern is to get the actions of residents associations more coor-

minated and to make them less isolated; this is particularly important in regards to the whole urban renewal programme. I presented the photographs again, but this time with one of the petitions of the Lozell's Residents Association. The result of that meeting has been that Jean and I are working now on a tape-slide presentation showing sights of the street, the shops, the problems with traffic, and the conditions of the houses. We are conducting interviews with shop-owners, shoppers, and possibly the City planner.»

Hopefully, the show will be seen in many places and make people more aware of their responsibility to intervene and of all the fun involved in doing something collectively about their shopping street. Only then can a powerful campaign, with a set of well thought out and broadly discussed aims, unfold and have a chance of success.

A political learning process

Another important side of the Lozell's Road Project is Jon's attempt to involve one of the new members of the Photography Workshop in the making of the exhibition and the tape-slide.

Q.: Why did you ask Jean to help you with the project?

JS.: «When she came to WELD I suggested to her that rather than just taking photographs of her friends she should work on a project. She said that she did not have anything that she specifically wanted to work on, so I suggested the Lozell's Road Project.»

Q.: Did she need a lot of persuading?

JS.: «No, it needed no persuading, but I don't feel that she feels committed to being part of the campaign. I try to involve her as much as possible with whatever discussions I have with the groups I'm organising meetings with, so that she actually participates in the planning and thinking process. That I find difficult because she is very unwilling to believe that she can actually do it.

Q.: Has Jean developed some ideas of what she would like to do after the Lozell's Road Project?

JS.: «I have not really talked about it with her. But the other way that Jean has been using her photography is for her college work. She works in a nursery and for her report about her placement she used photographs.»

I then asked Jean how she sees herself, her involvement with photography, the Lozell's Road Project, and WELD as a community arts centre generally:

Home and job.

Jean: «I'm Jean Reid, eighteen. I have lived in Handsworth all my life. I have one sister who lives in Jamaica, I have never seen her — only photographs. I have four brothers. One is working as a manager of a record shop, one is at school, and I have a little brother who is still at nursery school. My Mum works in a hospital in the catering department and my Dad is a welder. My parents were born in Jamaica near Kingstown. I am at college doing residential care — working with children and old people. We have one day a week where we go on a placement. The rest of the week is spent at college. After the two year course I am hoping to work in a residential home for children who haven't any parents»

Learning photography.

«I came down to WELD one day because my friend used to do photography and I wanted to find out about it. I was curious about how you developed pictures and I took it up from there. When my friends used to come to the darkroom I went along with her to see what she was doing and helped her out with the printing. When the time came for Jon to teach me I knew part of it already, so it came pretty easily. I have been coming now for four or five months. When I first started Jon just gave us film and a camera, and you go out and take anything just to practice. Then you develop the pictures. I took pictures of my family and friends at college. Then I started to take pictures of children at my nursery placement and added the photographs to the written work I was doing about the nursery. Since I have only just started none of my tutors has seen it yet, but my friends have. When I told them that I had printed them myself they couldn't believe me, but they have got used to it now. My Mum was quite pleased. I went to my brother's birthday party on Friday afternoon, and she said that since I did photography I should get some film and take some pictures of him at his party. So I did. I don't know how they will come out yet. Sometimes you shoot off a load of film and when you do the developing nothing comes out at all, it's a real disappointment. Jon says my pictures are OK but that I'm still taking them like snapshots. I am not quite sure what he means but I think he means I shouldn't just pose people for a picture.»

Lozell's Road Action Project.

«When I first started doing photography, Jon asked me if I would help him out with his project on Lozell's Road. From then I took photographs and went round with a petition. I'm a bit confused about how we are supposed to take photographs and what we are trying to do. For the first exhibition I didn't actually go to the meeting. Jon put my pictures up. He is trying to arrange two more meetings, one for the shop-owners, residents, and the Council, and that's when we are going to show the slides. Some of the Council don't know this area very well; they haven't seen it, so the slides show is to show them what it's like and to get the views of the customers. And the shop-owners can see what is going on.»

Criticisms of WELD?

«I like it here. I got to know WELD through the Youth Club. The boys always played table tennis and they never allowed the girls to use the tables, so we had practically nothing to do. Mandy said that it was up to us to find ideas about what we wanted to do. I like sewing so I used to sew. Then she brought in this woman who taught us how to do crafts. That was really good.

«I haven't really any criticisms of WELD. What I'd like to see is that on youth club night we'd have a mixed group of whites and blacks. It's not really Mandy's fault; whites can come to the youth club but they aren't really accepted. We had this Asian boy come to the club to teach the boys to play table tennis. They wouldn't accept him at all. They'd turn the lights off at the main switch and beat him up in the dark. Then when the lights came on again no one would admit that they had done it. He kept on coming every week, and every week they'd do the same because he said he wasn't going to give up on them. After a few weeks they accepted him because they knew he wasn't going to back out.»

Not all of the workshop members have been coming regularly over the last few months, and some of them have dropped out for several reasons: moving away, losing interest, getting a demanding job, or disenchantment with WELD. Others have kept up their interest, like the two girls who so enthusiastically started to take pictures of their school friends and then began a documentation project on the redevelopment of the canal basin. One of them is now keen to become more skilled and competent with an eye on doing photography as a job. The other, Sharon Smith, has continued with the documentation of the canal basin to the point where she contributed a collection of photographs as part of an exhibition about canals in

the West Midlands. The exhibition attempts to promote a greater use of the canals and the wasteland around them.

Here is what Sharon has to say about her involvement with photography:

Home.

Sharon: «I'm Sharon Smith, 17. I come from Handsworth. I've two older sisters and a younger brother. One's a chef, one works in a bank, and my brother is still at school. My Mum came from Cuba, but she was raised in Jamaica. My Dad's a Jamaican. They came to England in 1953. My Mum's a dinner lady and my Dad works as a fitter. I've just finished sixth form and joined the dole queue. My main interest is photography.»

Learning photography and project work.

«Last summer I went out on one of WELD's trips and they had a sign out advertising the Photography Project. I just had a new instamatic and the teacher thought the pictures were good, so I asked Mandy about the project and soon joined Jon's and Vanley's workshops. After going through the basics I got fed up with just taking pictures of my friends so I asked Jon if I could have a theme every month — say water or people — and he gave me Hockley Port. There they are developing a canal area for leisure. They're going to have an indoor gym, playing fields, and stables. I took pictures showing the changes in it and then I went on and did an exhibition of my pictures at the town library. My friends thought it was terrific. Now I'm just taking on little jobs. I'm doing one for the St. Silas Advice Centre. They had trouble with remodernising houses, they were badly done — damp and bad drainage — so I'm taking some pictures to show the conditions. I have also taken some pictures for the Handsworth Law Centre, some pictures of houses presented as information to show what they were talking about.»

Opinion on WELD.

«It has given me something worthwhile to do in my spare time rather than just moping around watching TV. I don't think that WELD can do much more, but people who come to WELD could do more in giving and communicating. There are also problems with robberies and race. WELD needs some black leaders so that it had half and half or even a black majority because WELD is in a black area. I think WELD tries too much, they show too much kindness, but it's not worth it because they just get trampled on.»

Researcher's comment: What particularly impressed me during the short visit was how Jon tries hard to arouse interest for project work among the users of WELD's photographic facilities. This is certainly a more positive

attitude than letting the resource stagnate on a dull hobby-level. On the other hand, involving people in social and political processes is a rather delicate matter and sometimes I had the impression that Jon was almost trying too hard instead of letting involvement develop spontaneously.

It also requires experienced knowledge of «human nature» to spot those members of the workshops who are ready to move a step further into action photography and those who still need guided practice. Soon, the project will hopefully knit a group of three or four action photographers together. The fact that Jon is already offering WELD's photographic skills to community groups might eventually create a steady demand, which in turn will encourage new members of the workshops to become involved. Hopefully Jon will also find enough support from his team colleagues at WELD. At present he is the only member of the group going beyond the geographical boundaries of WELD's catchment area and therefore could be criticised by his team on the basis that WELD should cater for the immediate neighbourhood. There also might be ideological objections to including new political tasks. So far WELD has succeeded in establishing a number of important services in its community. It also has fulfilled a political role by supporting the local Residents Association in their struggle to save the area from demolition. I personally believe that WELD as a whole could only gain from further stimulating community action rather than becoming another version of a social and cultural services agency responding more to the status quo than changing it.

Project work 1978–1979

Photographic activities

- Documenting WELD activities.
- Completion of involvement in Lozell's Road development campaign.
- Work with a playgroup. Set of photographs showing activities of playgroup (shown within WELD). Production of a photographic game to stimulate language development (with Sharon's and the playgroup organiser's involvement).
- Organising a filing system for all WELD's photographs.
- Mounting an exhibition about WELD for the Community Race Relations Unit of the British Council of Churches (CRUU) with Maralyn Carby, a member of the adult photographic workshop.
- Photographic game for Easter playscheme.

- Employment of Sharon on the Work Experience Scheme for six months (involvement in photography project generally and specific projects like workshops and supplying photographs of housing disrepairs for St. Silas advice centre).
- Workshops:
 - With youth club members. One workshop by Vanley Burke for 2-3 people (ongoing). Two workshops per week by Jon for 5-6 people (younger youth age) for a 2 month period.
 - Involvement of a mature student with no previous knowledge of photography to run a weekly workshop with kids (Paul Roper).
 - Weekly workshop with 2-3 young women from local street (both also involved in making tape-slide on housing disrepairs).
 - Two weekly workshops run by Sharon (photographic illustration of a child's cartoon).
 - Weekend crash course for four literacy students and two instructors with follow-up sessions. Intention: to establish a literacy group around photography.

In process and planned projects

- In process: Tape-slide production on housing disrepairs in the neighbourhood (involving local people doing it themselves).
- In process: an exhibition about Hindu dance to arouse interest in Asian culture.
- In process: Use of pinhole cameras in summer playscheme with the help of a volunteer (Terry Ried).
- Planned: Exhibition of WELD's Photography Workshop activities.
- Planned: Exhibition of photographic documentation on WELD's mural project.

As well as doing photography Jon Stewart was involved with the general running of WELD.

Outside activities

- Involvement with ACA (Association of Community Artists). Jon coordinated the exhibition on community arts together with John Dalton from Trinity Arts.
- Member of West Midlands Arts Photography Panel (4 meetings a year. Coorganising three workshops — for practising photographers, teachers, and community photographers.
- Member of the editorial panel of «TEN 8» (a photographic magazine).
- Member of the board of directors of Jubilee Community Arts Company.

Appendix

- 1) In the southerly Soho Ward, where 28,000 people were living in 1966, the infant mortality rate was double the national average. As many as 11.5% of residents lived at a density of 1.5 persons a room or more. There was one nursery and seven general practitioners to serve the area. Handsworth, in spite of possessing the highest number of Commonwealth immigrants in Birmingham, was not declared an educational priority area.
- 2) But before starting the scheme, which had been conceived by only a few aware individuals, a survey was initiated to establish the degree of local support for the proposed Holiday Play-and-Learn Centre. This method of using a survey to stimulate local interest in an issue, as well as drawing the community in to decision-making, proved to be very practical. It had also been successfully applied in other parts of the country, as, for example, in Notting Hill, London. In the Handsworth consultation exercise, 1,238 homes were visited and 148 families expressed their willingness to support a centre.
- 3) WELD also realised that its success in establishing a community development project depended on two conditions: «Firstly, it must arise in response to some real need in a neighbourhood. Secondly, it must use the energies and resources of the people of that neighbourhood. By responding to a need, the project gives people a reason for making a contribution. By using the energies of the local people, it emphasises their inter-dependence.» (WELD, an application, 1971).
- 4) The first full-time worker was Sue Lambert, a qualified teacher, who has worked for WELD since New Trinity opened in 1971. Her special field of interest was to set up facilities for children under five. In 1972, Luke Holland, a young South American with an education degree, joined WELD and became responsible for the evening activities at New Trinity which catered for the 7-12 age group. Colin Cuthbert, the photographer, and Steve Boud, who had a degree in economics, were among the next workers to be employed. Besides documenting WELD's activities, Cuthbert also prepared photographic visual aid material for a language project and helped with the evening activities, weekend and holiday projects, playgroups and general work at New Trinity. Steve Boud spent his time developing an adult literacy project, assisted in the running of the WELD shop, which was housed in a second building just across the road from New Trinity, selling second-hand clothes,

educational toys and locally made craft work. He also helped run existing activities.

New Trinity is an ideal place to host such a multi-purpose community education and arts project. The building comprises a large hall, which can be divided into three sections. Facilities include a cafe, a meeting and reading room, a kitchen, an office, woodwork and sitting rooms and a small playground at the back of the building. The salaries for the four project workers and running costs have been mainly covered by grants from the Cadbury Trust, the British Council of Churches, Birmingham City Council (including Urban Aid), the Adult Literacy Resources Agency, the West Midlands Arts and the Arts Council of Great Britain. WELD operates as an educational trust registered with the Charity Commission. There are six trustees who appoint the WELD Management Committee which is responsible for the running of the project. The Management Committee consists of the project workers, people from the different activity groups and anyone from the neighbourhood with an interest in the decision-making process. The catchment area of WELD is relatively small, as most of the activities focus on not more than half-a-dozen streets, containing about 120 houses. Although some events, like dances draw on a wider public.

- 5) Despite the encouraging breakthrough, there was plenty for the Resident's Association to do. There were the ongoing problems of the short term repairs to properties which had been neglected for years, on the assumption that they would be demolished. Once the programme of improvement work got under way, all sorts of other problems presented themselves and the Residents' Association became involved in potentially divisive issues, such as who should be moved first, where to and when. But there were also major failures: «The loss of the open space off New Inn Road after a series of bureaucratic blunders, manoeuvres, and back-somersaults has left many of us feeling very cynical about «participation», the supposed hallmark of the Urban Renewal Programme. Another factor is the number of people who have decided to leave the area. No one could have anticipated the exodus that took place once the programme got under way, particularly in view of our survey results. To an extent we were victims of our own success, in that the speed with which the programme took off militated against the sensitive approach necessary to keep the community together — one of the principal aims of the Urban Renewal Programme — while nursing it through a very difficult period.» (Annual Report 1975/76).

In 1978 WELD's community education and arts project still suffers from this major turn-over of the neighbourhood's population. Many people who had been actively involved in the Residents Association, the playgroup for under-fives, and other activities, moved away, so that WELD's workers now have to start from scratch to slowly build up new local support for formerly well-established ideas. Only if sufficient participation of parents and other interested local people is forthcoming has the project a legitimate reason to carry on and expand its programme. WELD also underwent changes in its staff when Sue Lambert and Luke Holland left the project. Angela Dyer, Karen Beard, Mandy Oko-Osi and Jon Stewart formed a completely new team together with Steve Boud, who was the only member from the original staff to carry on. They face the problems of involving a substantially new community in WELD's work.

Research material

- Interviews with Jon Stewart
- Interviews with Angela Dyer, Karen Beard, Vanley Burke, Mandy Oko-Osi, Stephen Boud, and Sue Lambert.
- Interviews with four members of the Photography Workshop.
- WELD annual reports 1973, 1975/76, 1977.
- A report by the Gulbenkian Foundation.
- Several grant applications.
- Newspaper articles:
 - Eileen Totten. *Education Guardian*. April 29, 1975.
 - Celia Hall. «Helping an area back on its feet.» *The Birmingham Post*. July 20, 1976.
 - Judith Cook. «An arts project centred on children.» 1972.
 - Diane Spencer. «WELD: filling in the gaps in Handsworth.» *The Times Educational Supplement*. June 29, 1973.

Summary

Some of the main principles in community media work

Access:

The groups in this report provide access on three levels: access to equipment, access to equipment and the staff's communication skills, and access to editorial control for people who are involved in a project but do not directly take part in production.

Open resource:

The most suitable organisational structure to facilitate access is the open resource, whereby media productions are generated either by project workers responding to demands raised in the community or initiating project work themselves. As demonstrated by the six groups the organisation of a resource can vary considerably. It may be part of a community arts centre, a community or social work agency, a development corporation, a local council, or may operate as an independent unit.

Organic growth:

Community media workers try — although not always successfully — to develop their projects from within the community rather than by imposing channels of communication from outside.

Credibility:

Each project undergoes a process of establishing a climate of mutual trust with the people and groups using a media resource.

Contextual and functional variety:

Open resources operate on a multitude of levels incorporating social, educational, and political processes. Usually a resource functions in one particular geographical community, involving the different sections of the population, including children, teenagers, adults, pensioners, ethnic minorities, and community groups with particular interests. However, the resource needs not to be limited to a geographical community, but may service a region or distribute its media productions nationally.

Combination of different media:

Often groups employ two or more media complementing each other to create maximum impact. Photographic displays can provide a visual environment for a video replay. Media can also be used in sequence in order to reach different audiences in different places. A good example of this is Liberation Films' work in Poplar, which started out as a video project and later encompassed a film, a book, and an exhibition.

A comparison between media

Photography

In terms of costs, it is the cheapest of all visual communication tools. Photos and slides can be used in different contexts: photographic exhibitions, leaflets, newspapers, magazines, posters, and books. Tape-slide shows also make it possible to address large audiences. They are visually attractive in terms of colour and big screen images. Photography is also particularly suitable for workshops because of the manual processes involved in creating a print.

Disadvantages:

Photography is static and therefore always remains one step behind video and film in capturing «reality». Distribution of tape-slides still poses some technical problems.

Video

A cheap medium compared to 16mm film. Video is suitable for *process* work because the tape can be erased and used again for other purposes. The instant replay capacity and the simple technical skills needed to operate the camera and the play-back mechanisms, make video most useful for collective projects where a group wants to involve a number of people in the shooting and editing of a tape. Video has the symbolic power of television. Because of the TV set's small size and intimacy, video is the ideal medium for small group discussions. With further technical innovation it is only a matter of time before big screen projection will become economically viable.

Disadvantages:

Video is expensive compared to photography, with a high risk of breakdown if the equipment is poorly maintained. It is visually less attractive than tape-slide or film. There are no standard distribution networks.

Local television

The most complex and expensive form of audio-visual community communication. If ideally developed, local television operates in a similar way to grassroots video with community groups either producing their own programmes or being assisted by the station staff. Local television also affords the opportunity of reaching television viewers in their homes rather than fixed public venues.

Disadvantages:

Because of the high costs involved and the politically delicate problems of accountability, only experienced and well equipped alternative media

groups (with a lot of local support) might be able to develop the necessary power to build up local tv/video communication systems.

16mm film

In terms of audio-visual impact (big screen, colour, sound) and in terms of distribution (most schools have a projector) film is still the most powerful medium available. It is most suited to sophisticated production techniques with large audiences in mind.

Disadvantages:

The high costs and the refined skills needed to handle the equipment make it less accessible for the low-key activities of a community media resource. For that purpose one definitely should opt for 8mm film.

All four media are effective and economic if their particular advantages are appropriately exploited. It would be as foolish to produce a 16mm film for a one-off group discussion as it would be to address a huge audience with a single TV monitor. It would also be wrong to confine video to process work alone. That under-values its potential as a tool for production — an aspect of community video which hopefully has emerged clearly from the case study about the West London Media Workshop. There is no good reason for saying one medium is better than another. An Arts Council report of uncertain standing recently recommended that community video funding should be entirely abolished. This kind of blanket condemnation of a medium is quite unjustified. Perhaps video was overglamourised in its early years, but it would be unwise to go the other extreme and totally deny its obvious usefulness.

Consolidation of present day activities

The reader should not expect a set of recommendations. To devise a plan of action aimed at consolidating and further stimulating the growth of community media activities ought to be the task of a working party composed of community media practitioners and officers from the different funding bodies.

Funding

Over and over again members of the six groups complained about the un-systematic and piecemeal nature of funding. All of the groups in this report — except Channel 40 — had to start with a bare minimum of seeding money. Even after establishing the value and quality of their project work they have been unsuccessful in securing long-term financial support. Valuable energy is lost on «fund-hunting». As the Community Arts Report, Arts

Council, 1977, admits:

«Whilst some multiplicity of fund-raising sources is inevitable, and in many ways desirable, there are aspects which seem time-wasting for everyone, expensive and inefficient» (p.14).

Many practitioners and funding agencies agree that in the long term the financing of media resource centres should come from local authorities. But who will back these centres and organisations when the importance of community media work is still not generally recognised? It is obvious that for a long time to come private foundations and non-local state agencies will have to play a decisive role in consolidating these activities.

Often the practitioners have said that they would like the funding agencies to become more committed instead of shifting funding responsibilities from one organisation to another. Ideally different funding bodies could amalgamate their efforts into one consistent policy as the Canadian government departments did when assisting the National Film Board in financing the Challenge for Change project (Proposal by Liberation Films). Sceptics feel that such a model would be impractical within the British system where state agencies and art bodies are said to jealously mark out their own territories and display a reluctance to cater for innovative activities outside their immediate briefs.

A good illustration of how compartmentalised thinking can threaten the development of media activities was the shift of GLAA's video policy in 1977, when they began to regard process video as beyond their responsibility as a regional arts association. «Film Video Extra», autumn issue 1977, carried this statement:

«From the nature of their work (community video groups) as presented to us their chief involvement is with community and educational work rather than with production. Whilst we are sympathetic with their outlook we believe that the local authorities and the ILEA ought to play a more clear-cut part in the financing of such groups.»

Having been left out in the cold, members of the Community Video Workers Group eventually began a dialogue with the GLAA film and video panel and succeeded in convincing them to reconsider their change in policy. This is how the group stated its position in an internal working paper:

«Our case depends on an openness on the part of the panel to question their accepted definition of art. ... We see our work as acting for the exploration and discovery of the culture that exists and is created within our own com-

munities. We work by, with and for local groups, not about and outside them. This demands involvement and participation from us as part of the community. As a result, our work is not the kind of consumable item that GLAA want to fund — a kind of hit-and-run system that ignores long-term commitment, the building up of relationships, or the possibility that art is other than individual self-expression.»

Other funding sources such as the Gulbenkian Foundation and the Arts Council have shown more understanding of the process/product dilemma and of the fact that community arts and community media activities embrace social and educational aspects as well as the more traditional forms of individual creative expression. The Community Arts Report, Arts Council, 1977 says:

«In the early stages of a project's development «process» will be more important than «product»; once established, the quality of the product becomes of increasing significance. But the assessment of quality in both process and product must always be made against the circumstances in which the work is being done...

«Is it the duty of the Council to isolate the art element in the project and then to assess it upon established criteria alone? We think not, for to do so would be to exclude a whole section of projects because they fall into an overall education or social development context, and so confine them to seeking support from local education authorities or some non-existent social development agency or Urban Aid.» (p. 14/9)

It is to be hoped that a tolerant and understanding interpretation of traditional definitions of cultural activities will eventually predominate in the funding of community media projects.

Research

Inefficiencies in the present system of dispersed funding are not only rooted in inadequate co-ordination between grant-giving bodies and in the insufficient commitment among some of them to take up full responsibility for community arts and community media activities, but they also derive from a lack of communication between funders and the many groups they are catering for. To work through mountains of applications leaves little time for the officers to concern themselves more thoroughly with what is happening on the ground on a day to day basis. Practitioners repeatedly say that they would like to see the funding bodies assess their projects less critically when they come up for review. Rather they want them to assist more constructively in overcoming problems of finance, equipment, and accommodation.

Research could fulfil a useful role in strengthening links between practitioners and decision-makers. Researchers could speak for the groups under study, thus helping to equalise the relationship between the powerful officers and committees at the centre and the groups at the receiving end, who are exposed to the «changing moods of the Gods.»

In practical terms the researcher could act as a kind of «travelling editor», visiting a chosen number of groups regularly, encouraging practitioners to write up their experiences, conducting interviews with them and resource users, and putting the material together in the form of simple newsheets. The inter-active nature of such a research procedure could be reinforced by organising conferences with the participation of all groups, officers, and committee members involved. The advantage of action research over more traditional forms of collecting empirical material is obvious. Instead of waiting for the final «product» to appear in report or book form, information is continuously fed back to those working on the ground.

Debate

Groups often work in isolation and are relatively unaware of solutions other groups may be applying to similar problems such as how to operate as a collective, how to define priorities, and how to keep a resource economically viable. At present a sense of apathy and pessimism prevails about the usefulness of meeting other groups to discuss work in a self-critical context. Daily survival absorbs most groups' energies and leaves little enthusiasm for more theoretical discussions.

Struggling for financial survival just for survival's sake frequently results in mindless pragmatism. A group needs a lot of breathing space to rethink its priorities. Discussion between groups is therefore not a luxury, but a vital means to raising important questions:

Is the group really effective? What does «effective» mean? Does the work promote change and involve people sufficiently? Can more effective working methods be found?

Curriculum vitae:

Heinz Nigg, born 1949 in Zurich.

Citizen of Zurich and Maienfeld.

Went through Primary-, Secondary- and Grammar School in Zurich.

1967/68 Lived in the United States as an AFS-exchange student.

1969—1976 Human Science studies at Zurich University.

Subjects: History, Political Science and Social Anthropology (Ethnologie).

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1976—1978 Field research in London on community arts and community communication.

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Since 1979 lecturer at the Ethnologisches Seminar Zürich and freelance media worker.

